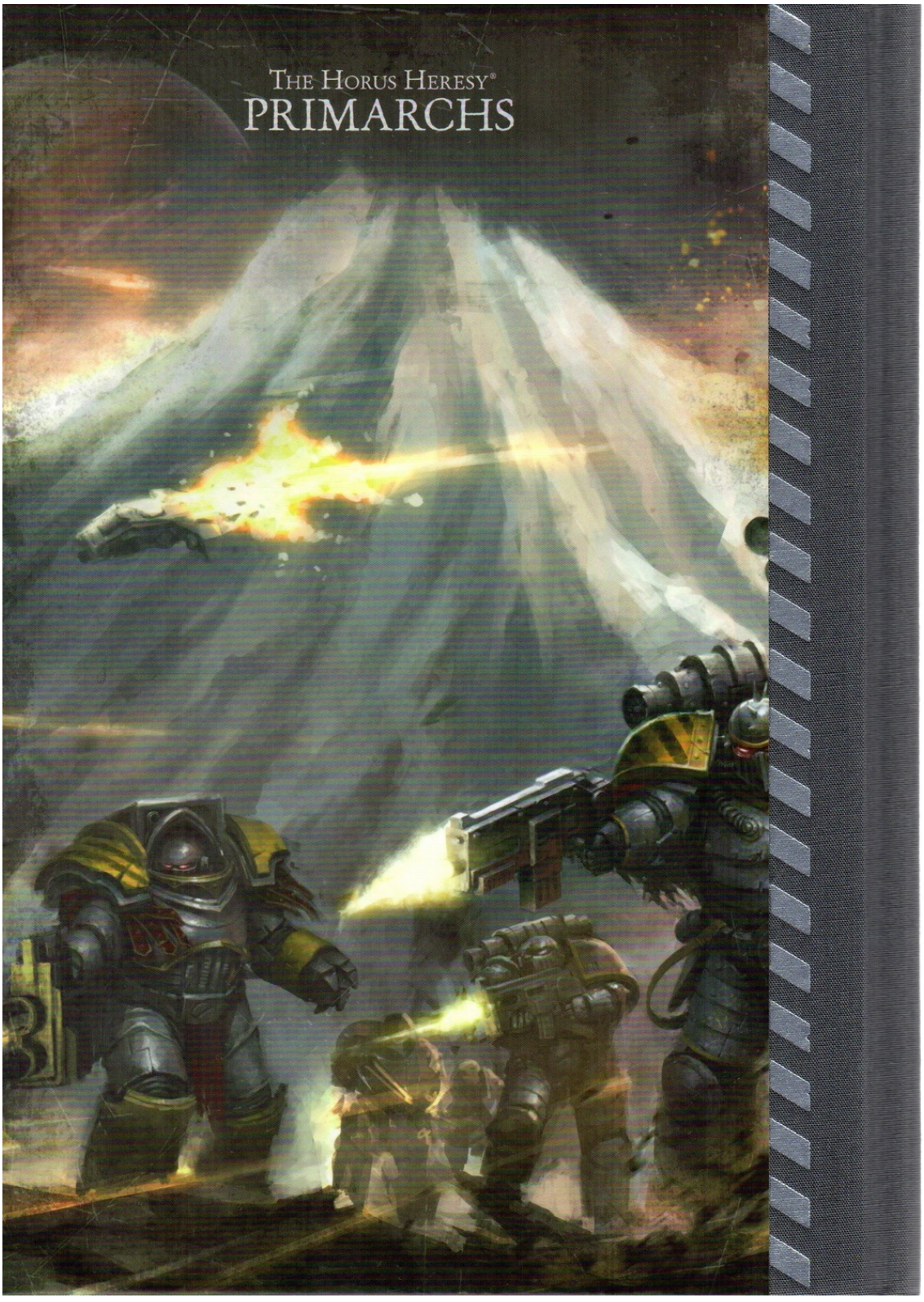
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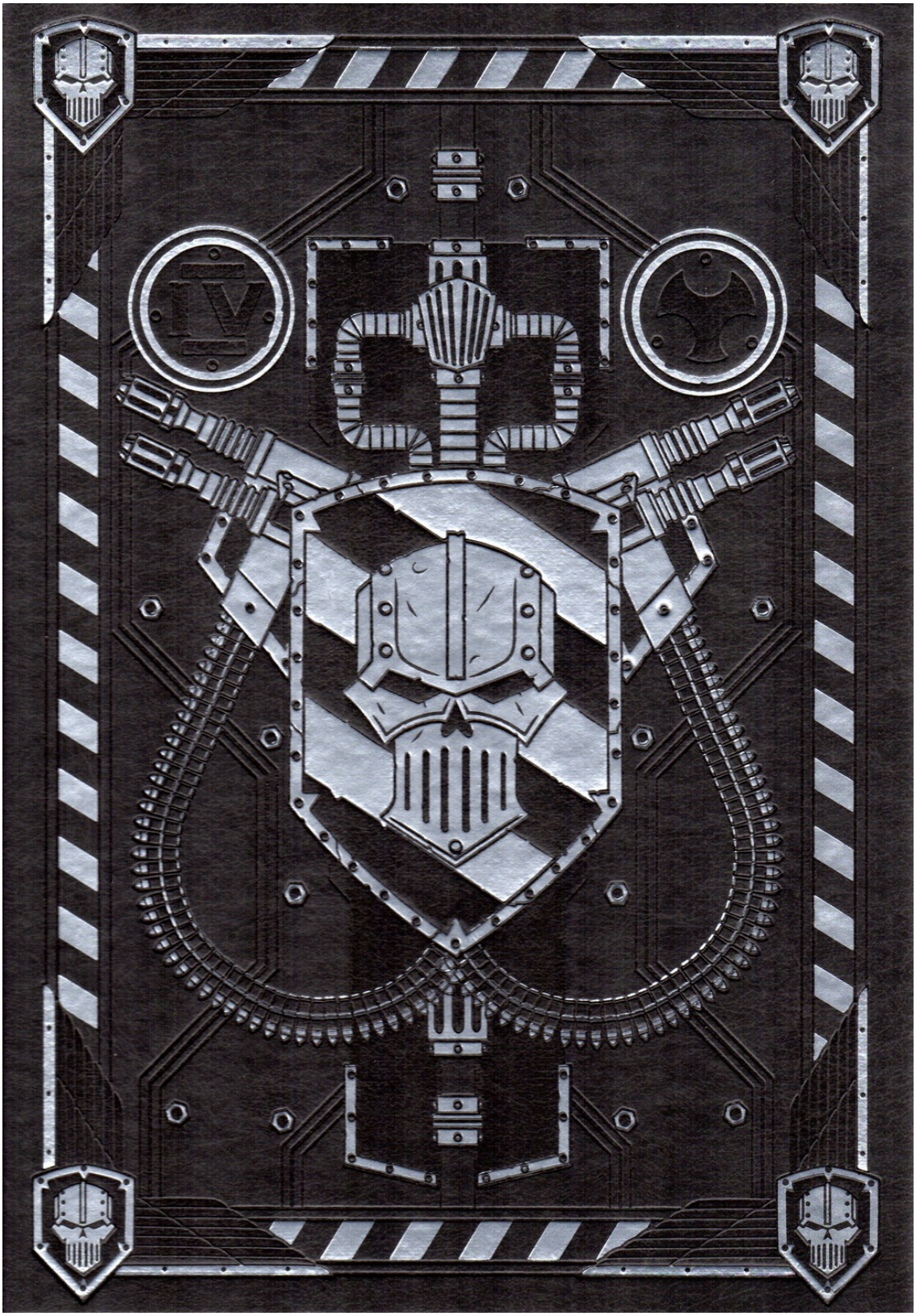

THE HORUS HERESY®

PRIMARCHS

'I SHALL KILL YOU ALL.
AND AFTER I HAVE WIPED
YOUR BLOOD FROM MY HANDS,
I WILL BEND ALL MY EFFORTS TO
TEARING THIS CITY DOWN,
STONE BY STONE, UNTIL
NOTHING REMAINS AND
ITS PEOPLE ARE GONE
INTO SLAVERY.'

THE HORUS HERESY®

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

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The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away...

ONE

THE TYRANT OF LOCHOS

799.M30
LOCHOS, OLYMPIA

The last of the rain cleared away. Fresh moisture was drunk eagerly by the thirsty earth, turning it dark. In the morning the ground would return to its sandy hue, but until then, the sharp scent of rain on arid ground hung about the mountains.

Through the cool last watch of the night, along a drying path of hard-packed earth, the boy Perturabo was taken to Lochos.

Four men in white-and-gold armour escorted him, two before and two behind. If the boy had lacked anything but the greatest confidence, he would have seen himself as their prisoner. That was the warriors' purpose, to be his guards, but they doubted it themselves now that they had found him. When Perturabo spoke, they listened keenly, as if his words compelled them to hearken. All of them saw the sham of guard and guarded for what it was.

The boy was called Perturabo at his own insistence. The leader of the men was named Miltiades. His coloured helm crest proclaimed him Sub-Optio in the 97th Grand Company of Lochos, a man of authority among his people The other men did not offer their names, and so the boy did not know them. Boy, man - these

terms were purely subjective. Perturabo looked like a boy, and so it was reasonable to assume he was a youth. He was not. There was an unearthly air to him. He moved and spoke like a man used to high office. They kept up the pretence that they were men and he was a boy, and therefore they were in command, but none of them believed that either. Perturabo's manner suggested that he was better than them, superior in every way, and they accepted it meekly.

Low cloud became mist that writhed down the cliffs into the valleys, uncloaking diamond stars. The star maelstrom glowered with imminent menace at the centre of the sky. Though the men had said they could not see it, Perturabo was aware of its malevolent gaze at all times. Not wishing to feel fear, he ignored it and focused his attentions on the world beneath his bare feet.

The road was rough, studded with rock polished smooth by the feet of generations of animal herders. Thorny plants lining its edges scraped at the boy's legs. He examined them cursorily as he passed, curious about them even though he already knew their fundamental essences intimately. He breathed deeply, thrilling at the rain smell even as he formulated hypotheses as to where the rain had come from, and why it affected the world the way it did. Everything was new, and everything familiar. Knowledge came into his mind without active recollection. It was simply a part of him. He was a newborn burdened with wisdom beyond his years.

Lochos rose immense and massy on a horizon foreshortened by bladed mountains, yet made distant by the valley between the party and the city's bronze gates, dull in the dark. Its golden domes hunkered down behind towering walls and bastions, like the helmets of men sheltering from their enemy. Weapon barrels protruded from its many embrasures. It was a place of strength with pretensions to beauty that it could not quite carry off; its warlike nature was too pronounced for that.

The boy and his party crested a steep ridge in silence. The world had the preternatural hush of the dying night. Their feet scuffed the path and their battlegear jingled too loudly in the quiet. A dry, tussocky stretch of sharp montane plants sloped away, the spaces between the scrubby grasses and gorse broken by rocks sharp as teeth. The ground was poor, but boundaries of the same stone, expertly fitted together, divided the upland into fields nonetheless. Man's habit of jealously separating his possessions from those of his neighbour was strong even here, though the land in question was barely worth definition.

The walls ran right to the point where the ground came to a precipitate finish and the valley plunged deep. The grey light of predawn blurred everything

together. Although the valley was still invested by night, the boy had superb vision, and on the far side he saw terraced fields and forests of coniferous trees and towering, thorny succulents.

Out of sight, animals bleated. The road turned to follow one of the dry stone walls. The path brought them to the brink of cliffs where the valley yawned wide and deep. Village lamps gleamed in the depths, their light reflecting from tumbling brooks and the flat waters of stepped reservoirs. The damp, rich aroma of quickening plant life filled the valley brim to brim. The road went over the edge, down steps carved into the side of the rock, carrying Perturabo from the dry air of the high mountain to the forest-moist atmosphere of the valley in a few paces. The guards fell into single file, Miltiades in front of Perturabo, the rest after.

Lochos dominated this fertile slash in the unforgiving land. Perturabo's memory was a blank, devoid of meaningful content, but he understood what he saw as if he had direct experience of it. He apprehended the geological processes that had created the valley.

He appreciated the reason for Lochos' situation, what it was meant to protect, and why people would wish to protect such a place at all.

Miltiades paused at a short landing in the stone-cut stair. Holding out his hand, he broke his silence. 'This part is treacherous.'

'I require no help,' said Perturabo, staring at the sub-optio's hand with the same kind of mild curiosity with which he regarded everything.

'Suit yourself,' said Miltiades. He turned away, failing to hide his unease at the uncanny youth.

The steps were worn and slippery with algae fed by water seeping out of the rock. Perturabo negotiated the section easily. From there it was a short descent to a wider, paved road. The outer edge was bounded by the precipitous slopes of the valley, and marked by a low, mortared wall. The men took up their positions around the boy, four corners to a square.

'Is this the road to Lochos?' the boy asked.

The road curved out of sight around a high bluff topped with wrinkled crags. The ground was dark with water yet to be absorbed, though not wet enough to turn the road surface to mud. Rising temperatures made the place uncomfortably muggy, but the change did not affect the boy at all. Temperature was a variable to be noted, appraised and remembered for later examination, nothing more.

'This is the road to Irex,' said Miltiades. 'It joins the highway to Lochos below us. We must go further down to get there.'

They descended at a brisk march. The light in the sky turned from grey to a pale gold, and the overwhelmed stars withdrew.

Even the star maelstrom faded to a livid bruise. The boy was glad of it. With the coming of the sun, the maelstrom's power to see him was lessened, and a part of himself relaxed - a part that he had not been aware of before.

Night clung on in the valley, and the deeper they went the darker it became The air thickened with the shadows, as if the darkness were gathering there for a last stand in defiance of the strengthening day.

Colour seeped into the world. From the villages and farmsteads clinging to the slopes of the valley, the sounds of waking families emanated, carrying far in the rarefied air. The houses were built in precarious places, atop rocks and crags. By observing this, along with the elaborate terracing and soil traps that filled the hills, Perturabo measured the importance the inhabitants attached to every inch of arable ground.

The road fed into the highway. Close-fitted stone made a smooth surface, along which plodded occasional carts drawn by draft beasts.

It was still quiet, and the party made good progress down the valley. The road met a white river and went onto a dyke beside it made from rocks carefully fitted into the spaces between flood-dumped boulders. A short while later, the road crossed the river via a broad bridge. On the far side it immediately began to switch back up a steep rise that quickly became a sheer cliff, unmarked by man's hand save for the laboriously cut loops of the road.

The walls of Lochos grew from the mountaintop. They were fashioned from slabs of sandstone so closely fitted that the walls made a seamless whole, indivisible from the rock they were built upon. But although they grew from the peak and were of the same material, the walls were as different to the mountain as the boy was to the men. In art and majesty, the walls exceeded the mountain. They surrounded the peak, conquering it - the artifice of man surpassed that of nature. The boy and the fortress were the same in that regard.

Miltiades looked back to the boy, pride evident in his voice. 'The walls of Lochos,' he said. 'Unbreachable and unbroken.'

'Nothing lasts forever,' said Perturabo.

Miltiades scowled.

The road went back and forth in precise zigzags. A central channel took water and provided a track for the braking poles of waggons. The road steepened, and ridges of precisely shaped setts broke the surface to provide traction. Small bastions guarded every switch near the top.

A semicircular plaza carved directly from the rock fronted the great gatehouse. The gates were thick wood sheeted with bronze and faced with hard spikes of iron. Two giant towers guarded them.

Miltiades stopped in front of the gates and rapped upon a tiny postern set into the rear of the left-hand tower. It had been placed at an angle awkward for rams, and when it opened it revealed a narrow stair guarded by an iron yett. Perturabo saw a weakness there.

'Back so soon, sub-optio?' said the guard. He wore a uniform that differed to Miltiades' garb and spoke to him insolently. His face changed when Miltiades stepped back and held out his arm to indicate Perturabo.

'Inform the palace,' said Miltiades. 'We have the boy.'

So Perturabo first came to Lochos, stealing in through a secret way.

The city was still waking as they marched up its steep, winding streets. Night workers and those whose trade forced early rising went to and fro.

Perturabo had never seen so many people - at least, as far as he knew. He had found himself upon a cliff. He had climbed it. He had met Miltiades and his men. That was the sum total of life experience Perturabo could recall. The city might hold far more.

It *did* hold far more. There was a pregnant air over its buildings, the sense of thousands of dreamers returning to the waking world. It fascinated him.

The city stepped up the mountain in tiers, with the palace filling the levelled peak, but the walls were truly monumental, rising higher than the lowest three levels and casting them into shadow while the sun warmed the stone outside.

Perturabo and his escort went along the main way, passing tight streets between small-windowed tenements. Every so often market squares opened up, full of traders chatting as they set out their wares. At regular intervals there were giant cisterns crowded by servants bearing water pots on their heads, while near the top levels rose huge temples and other edifices roofed with gleaming bronze.

The palace outshone them all. A huge plaza surrounded its walls, and three domes crowned its towers. The gates were decorated with glorious reliefs in gold and silver. A glance at the windows, and their ratios of construction, the load upon them and the mathematics needed to calculate both and more were Perturabo's to command. There was so much to see that he had never seen before, but much was familiar. He knew it all: the materials, their properties and the effects the architect had intended to instill.

Perturabo looked upon everything and was at once amazed and jaded. His delight at each new observation faded as the knowledge sprang into his mind,

leaving him feeling cheated of the joy of discovery. Even so, the palace impressed him by the way it dominated the city. It looked out over the roofs and the wall to the plunging view beyond. On the far side of the fertile lands, he saw the scrubby upland he had gained at the end of his climb. Beyond that was a wide void, blue with pollen, smoke and dissipating mists. Far away on the other side, more mountains rose. In every direction there were mountains stained orange by the young day, their flanks stepped with ancient quarries, their pinnacles crowned with forts.

Miltiades drew Perturabo's attention back to the palace.

The great gates of silver and gold groaned wide, and the palace opened itself to him.

The tyrant was awake and ready. He had been expecting the youth.

Ranks of gold-and-white armoured men lined the marble hall, filling the gaps between its tall columns. Their faces were stern in their open helmets. Flambeaux competed with weak electrical illumination, but they were all being overwhelmed by the light of the sun.

Two titanic statues stood either side of a huge throne, their right hands held out in natural, lifelike poses. The totems they clasped in their left fists, and the robes that adorned their heroically muscled bodies, were rendered in iron.

Upon the throne between these two huge figures, the tyrant sat. He was small and middle-aged, a crown of stylised iron pine needles on his head. A pair of golden sceptres nestled casually in the crooks of his arms; here was a man who wielded his power with seeming carelessness.

At first glance, the tyrant was not an imposing sight, being spare-limbed with the hump of a round stomach clearly visible under his chiton of imperial purple. His black hair was sparse, and the style he wore it in, brushed up to feather his scalp, only accentuated its lack. His nose was prominent, and his eyes close set. Indeed, he seemed to have been poorly fated, for the men he surrounded himself with were lithe and clean-limbed and handsome of face, while the patricians gathered in a crowd before his throne were taller and more richly dressed than him.

But his courtiers seemed pompous in comparison, like peacocks around a hawk, and though his throne was scaled monumentally and should have engulfed him, somehow the many tonnes of masonry around the tyrant served to aggrandise the little man rather than diminish him. The statues to his left and right were superficially more impressive than him, but they were ridiculous in their size. There was no power in their pupil-less eyes. They were blind, and stone dead.

Dammekos, the Tyrant of Lochos, was vital.

A great will was caged in his modest flesh, and from behind his plain face a sharp intelligence looked out upon the world. He masked his eagerness at the party's approach, but Perturabo saw it all too clearly, and suspicion stirred in his breast as to what this man desired of him.

The men and their charge halted at the dais of the throne. Miltiades grasped Perturabo's shoulder and pushed down to force the boy to kneel. Although he was a head shorter than the sub-optio, Perturabo was as immovable as bedrock, and resisted without effort.

Dammekos waved Miltiades away irritably, too excited by his guest to care for the niceties of deference. Miltiades stepped back, and he and his three men knelt.

A herald came forward.

'All hail Dammekos,' he called in a clear, beautiful voice, 'eighth of his name, Tyrant of Lochos, third of the twelve Tyranthikos, Lord of Irex, Kerroitan, Domminiki, and the Septologies of Alka. All hail Dammekos!'

The soldiers in the hall stamped once The herald stepped smartly back.

Dammekos adjusted his sceptres.

'Well then, Miltiades, what have we here?' His voice was quick and prying. Not unpleasant, as there was a generous measure of warmth to the words, but his charm could not mask his intellect, nor his greed. 'The mythical boy of Chaldicea, I'll warrant. No myth at all!'

'It is he, tyrant,' said Miltiades.

'I admit, I had not expected you to return so early, Miltiades,' said the tyrant. 'You have outdone yourself. You only set out last night! Weren't you just saying last week how long it would take you to cover Chaldicea to find him? It appears you were wrong.' His courtiers laughed. They whispered behind their hands. Miltiades looked up. 'We found him here, my king, climbing the Phrygean cliffs. We got little further than the Irex road. Shepherds saw him yesterday, attempting the climb. We went to meet him.'

'And where are these shepherds?'

'With their flocks, my king,' said Miltiades.

'Miltiades!' Dammekos scolded affably. 'What kind of example are you setting to our guest? Where is your sense of generosity? See to it they are rewarded - five lochans apiece.'

'It shall be so, my king,' said Miltiades.

Dammekos turned his attention directly upon the boy. Until then he had been examining him covetously but had not engaged with him, as if Perturabo were a

work of art he might purchase rather than a thinking being. Now Dammekos smiled broadly and looked into Perturabo's ice-blue eyes.

'You must be the boy who has been roaming the Chaldic highlands. You must be,' he mused. 'I do not see how it could not be you. I have never seen so finely formed a youth. You outmatch the stories.'

'I do not know if this person is me,' said Perturabo mildly. Now it was Dammekos' turn to be appraised by the boy. The king smiled indulgently at the boy's boldness.

'You do not know?'

'I have no memory from before yesterday. I was halfway up the cliff. I finished my climb. That is all I remember.'

'How came you to be climbing the cliff?'

'I do not know. I remember nothing,' said Perturabo.

'My king!' hissed Miltiades. You will address him as 'my king!'" Perturabo looked back at the officer. 'He is not my king. Or if he is, I do not know him.'

Dammekos let out a disarming laugh. 'Now now, sub-optio, we cannot rebuke our guest for neglecting the proper form of address. If he remembers nothing, how can he know what to say?'

'Then he should learn, my king,' said Miltiades. 'He is in your hall.'

'He will, we can be sure of that. But he is correct. If he does not know who he is, then how can he know me for his master? For now, let us be kind and forgive him his ill manners. Tell me boy, there have been reports for several months of a youth of your description coming from the plateau of Chaldicea. What do you know of that?'

'I said I know nothing.'

'It must be you,' said the king again. 'The wanderer who comes down from the mountains. The boy who slays jalpidae, and who bested a hydraka with a wooden dub. The child who wields a smith's hammer with the skill of an artist.'

Perturabo looked at his hands. The cuts inflicted by his climb had scabbed over already. Was that normal? They were thick and heavy, digger's hands. Could such hands be artful?

'I do not know this person,' said Perturabo.

'Shall we see then?' said the tyrant pleasantly. He bent forwards in his throne, embracing his sceptres to him. 'Shall we find out together if you are this boy?'

'You mean to test me?'

'If you are agreeable to the proposition.'

'What if I fail?'

'You will not be harmed,' replied Dammekos. 'I am sure such a fine example of manhood could be found a role here of some sort. You will be cared for.'

'And what if I pass?' said Perturabo suspiciously.

The king smiled. 'Then we shall see. Pass or fail, in either case I promise no harm will come to you. What manner of king would I be to slay a living legend, one that brings joy to my people? Tyranny is an art. You will not find me an artless man.'

'I agree to your test then,' said Perturabo. He had nothing to lose, and he was curious to see if he was this boy, and what the test would be.

The king raised a hand and nodded. A gong sounded. A door in the side of the hall was flung open, and a bald eunuch heavy with flab-coated muscle strode in. Behind him, six of his fellows dragged a portable cast-iron forge into the room. Great heat radiated from the metal cylinder holding its fires, and an orange light glowed through a grill in the door. Bellows were set up, along with a quenching butt. Lastly, an anvil was brought within and placed upon a tree stump. The wood was freshly felled and still yellow, while the anvil's dull grey was as yet unmarked. Both were new, untested. Perturabo was pleased with the parallel.

The eunuchs opened the side of the portable forge and removed a plate from the tapering roof, exposing a bed of fiercely glowing charcoal. The eunuchs pumped the bellows and the coals glowed brighter. Thin smoke streamed from the short chimney, winding its way up into the palace's hammer beams. A barrel of iron rods was set beside Perturabo, and a wooden carryall full of tools.

Everyone in the hall looked at him expectantly. Perturabo looked at the king.

'Begin,' said the tyrant.

Perturabo let his instinct guide him. He decided then and there to make a sword. He took up a bundle of iron rods and sorted them, testing their weight and their tone by striking them upon the anvil. He listened carefully to each. He had no idea which ones to choose, so selected those that *felt* right. He thrust them deep into the fire without gloves, his hands coming so close to the flames that the king's courtiers gasped, but Perturabo did not fear the flames and did not flinch from them, instead continuing to hold the rods as they took on the heat of the furnace.

'Bellows,' he said, releasing the metal. The eunuchs recognised the power in him and obeyed instantly, pumping long, curved bellow irons until the fire roared and the metal turned white.

To draw out the metal, Perturabo put on a thick hide glove, sized for an adult but already tight on his fist. He did not use the pliers offered him, but dragged

out the metal in his gloved hand and commenced beating upon it with the smith's hammer. He worked slowly, methodically. The iron was unyielding; it required the application of heat to change it. Only in this way could its uncompromising nature be moulded into a weapon. There was a warning there, perhaps, but Perturabo did not recognise it as such, being drawn into his work with the total absorption shared by geniuses and the simple-minded alike. He worked far faster than any smith known to the court, striking the metal as quickly and surely as the steam hammers in the foundries. Showers of sparks rained from the blade taking shape under his hand, skittering away across the marble flagstones.

For hours he worked. The court receded from his attention. There was only the iron on his anvil. With his indomitable will he shaped it, refusing to acknowledge its strength as he forced it to accept its new form. Iron was honest and true, without guile.

A *warrior's metal*, *with none of the sickness of gold*, he thought.

How did he know that? Did it matter? He liked the iron; he did not care for gold. It sang to him as he struck it, and his heart knew the refrain.

Seven times the blade went into the fires, came out, was beaten and quenched. Mists of metallic steam billowed from the water butt, filling the hall and raising the temperature as the morning passed. Dammekos watched, fascinated. The rest of the court grew restive, requiring food and drink but unwilling to leave before their master. Neither the tyrant nor the boy noticed.

One last time the blade went into the water. Perturabo wiped the sweat from his brow and held up the weapon by its tang. Dammekos gestured that Miltiades take it.

The blade was plain and unadorned, lacking fitments and yet to be ground to an edge, but it was clear that it was fit for its purpose.

'It is perfect!' said Miltiades in amazement. He weighed its balance in his hand, sighting down the edge. 'Perfect.' He held it up to his lord. 'This was done with just a hammer.'

Whispers went around the great hall.

'It is not finished. It needs sharpening. No weapon is complete until it is honed,' said Perturabo. Another thing he knew without knowing, as innate to him as his sense for iron.

'Indeed,' said Dammekos thoughtfully. 'You may hone it later, in my engineering workshops.'

'I thank you. It would…' Perturabo thought for a moment, unsure of how to describe the emotion he felt at the thought of leaving the blade dull, 'displease

me if I were not to complete my task.'

'Commendable, young man.' A calculating look came into Dammekos' eye. It saw all of the value of Perturabo, but none of his worth; the youth, though new to the world, was sure of that. 'Perhaps you might wish to work here, and be prenticed to our metalworkers? It would be a fine life.'

'Perhaps,' replied the boy. 'But I feel this working of iron is not my true strength.'

'Then what is?' asked Dammekos.

Perturabo looked around. He pointed to the gun at the sub-optio's waist, a complicated device of bulbous protrusions and flanged edges built around a glass flask crackling with captive lightning. 'That,' he said. 'I would learn its workings. And this…' He gestured at the high roof. 'I wish to build, I think. The stone speaks to me, as much as the iron.'

Dammekos clapped his hands in delight. 'Do you still doubt, sub-optio? The boy is he, the wanderer. Well! Well, well, well. Anoinkai's hand is in this, it is sure! He is a gift from the gods!'

'Who is Anoinkai?' asked the boy.

'The goddess of fate,' said Miltiades. 'How can he be of the gods if does not know that?' The sub-optio's hand rested on his sword hilt warily.

'What are gods?' asked Perturabo. The term was alien to his ears.

'The beings above us, who watch from the summit of Mount Telephus and judge all men. These are their likenesses,' said Dammekos, gesturing at the sculptures either side of him. 'Gozek and Calaphais, the twin tyrants of the gods.'

Perturabo looked at the statues doubtfully.

'Has anyone ever seen these beings?'

A shaven-headed man, perspiring in ornate robes, stepped forwards.

A priest, thought Perturabo contemptuously. He recognised his sort instinctively, and just as instinctively, he did not trust them.

'They are removed from us by their own design,' said the priest. 'The divine and the mundane are separate, overlapping spheres that are distinct, but which influence each other.'

Perturabo sneered. 'A world you cannot see? The existence of such things is illogical. All mortal experience can be encompassed by the rational laws of reality.' He paused. How could he prove what he had just said? Nevertheless, he felt it deeply, utterly, as an unshakeable conviction.

'Blasphemy!' said the priest.

'Make-believe. A modesty curtain for ignorance,' said Perturabo.

'I do not like these gods. They are the enemies of reason.'

'Then if not from the gods, where are you from?' asked Dammekos.

'I do not know.' He paused again. A fierce yearning tightened his throat. 'I want to know.'

'Then stay here, with me,' said Dammekos. 'You shall learn all we can teach you. I will help you discover your place of origin, but you must serve our city in return.'

'In battle?'

'Maybe.'

'What of peace?'

'You made a sword. You could have made a plough.'

'What of peace?' Perturabo repeated. A hot feeling stirred in him. He did not like it.

Dammekos smiled unconvincingly. 'There will be peace. No one attacks Lochos. They see the walls of our city and they give up in despair and retreat. Lochos has not been successfully sieged in six hundred years! War is necessary boy, but never desirable. There is always time for peace.'

The boy's cold expression froze the tyrant's mirth. Dammekos' smile set on his face.

Liar, the boy's expression said.

'What use are walls against someone who refuses to give up?'

'I have not yet met such a person,' said the tyrant, but in his heart he knew that very person was standing in front of him, dripping with sweat from the heat of the forge. 'If you are to serve me, I must know you. Tell me your name.'

'It is Perturabo.'

'That is not a name of Lochos. What does it mean?' asked the king.

'I do not know,' said Perturabo. 'Only that it is my name, and was always intended to be so. As to its meaning, I will find out.'

He looked around the hall, at all the artifice that had gone into its construction, and at the people it encompassed, the clothes they wore and the jewels they displayed. Their weapons, their habits, their footwear - he wanted to know how they all worked.

'I will find everything out.'

TWO

DANTIOCH

999.M30
GHOLGHIS, THE VULPA STRAITS, SAK'TRADA DEEPS

Barabas Dantioch was tired of the dark. His face longed for bright sunlight, and he went helmless as much as the temperature allowed, but it was never light on Gholghis, not truly. Its small, wan sun shone candle-dim in a sky crowded with stars. Lit by pale white light, Gholghis' grey rock made for a confusing landscape where shadow and stone were difficult to tell apart, as if the planet had camouflaged itself in order to hide. White dwarfs birthed poor planets as a rule, but Gholghis seemed especially unfriendly, as if resentful of the Iron Warriors' presence.

Yet there was life of a sort on Gholghis. Primitive lichens clung to shaded rocks, and there were fungi-like plant-animals in the caves. A thin atmosphere gave the garrison enough air to breathe The stone was poor, but when crushed and sintered it made passable blocks for the construction of the fortress. An Iron Warrior worked with what he had.

These thoughts and many others passed through Dantioch's well-ordered mind as he stood upon the parapet. His grand battalion laboured a hundred metres away, shoring up the weakened west wall. All the while, Sergeant Zolan spoke

urgently, as he already had at length.

'Gholghis is lost, warsmith,' Zolan was saying. 'We need to evacuate this place. Krak Fiorina is under nightly siege. Our company at Stratopolae is suffering catastrophic losses. These worlds cannot be held. We're damned if we stay here by those thrice cursed… *things*. Look below, the rock of the western facing is rotten through.'

He pointed down the wall to where Iron Warriors laboured with heavy construction units. Cracks in the stone peeked through the shrouding of plastek-covered scaffolding.

There was a watercourse far beneath the wall. For some reason, the alien hrud favoured it as some sort of conduit. Transiting its length, they simply vanished. How they did this was a mystery, and where they went when they had traversed it equally so.

'They pass through the bowels of the earth in such numbers,' said Dantioch, scratching irritably at his short beard, 'that our wall returns to the dust whence it came.'

'Everything is failing,' said Zolan. 'My squad has multiple issues with its equipment, and my men are not alone.'

Warsmith Dantioch watched a three-storey-tall machine scratch at the ground with bladed shovels while another waited to pump rockcrete into the watercourse. The work progressed slowly; their serfs were all dead, the auxiliaries too. Most of their servitors had aged into uselessness.

'The primarch orders us to hold the Vulpa Straits,' Dantioch said. 'We are iron. We will not bend.'

'Iron perishes with time, and time is against us. Do you think me so lacking in honour and fortitude that I would suggest a retreat lightly?' said Zoltan forcefully. 'There are too few of us left to hold this place Our orders have been superseded by circumstance. There is no point in holding the straits any longer. There will be no settlement here while this migration builds, and we cannot utilise it as a supply line. Warsmith, the hrud have not settled here. They do not seem to be about to change their minds. We should let them pass through and return when they have gone. The Fifty-First Expedition is finished. Let us retreat, regroup and throw ourselves on Perturabo's mercy, preciously rare as that is, while there are still some of us left to retreat. I am sure you can sway the primarch.'

Dantioch turned a disapproving face on his subordinate.

'We hold,' he repeated slowly, as if he were speaking to a mentally deficient

serf.

Zolan's face twisted in anger but he bowed, his palm flat against his heart.

'As you command, warsmith,' he said. 'Iron within.'

'Iron without,' responded Dantioch.

Zolan let him be. Dantioch was glad of the respite. He had little to say to Zolan because Zolan was right: Gholghis was lost, and the 51st Expeditionary Fleet had come to the end of its life.

I could blame Perturabo for this, he thought.

His fleet had been spread too thin in the first place; two grand battalions were an insufficiency of warriors for so many worlds. But he was not the sort of man to place the blame for his own failings on others. What he had been asked to do was difficult, but not impossible. There had been little in the straits to oppose them. The hrud warrens there had been minor and easily overcome, if ease could ever be a term applied to warfare against such terrible alien beasts.

After compliance, they were tasked with raising fortifications to act as nexuses for future colonies and waypoints for the Legion's supply fleets. It was the standard manner of war for his kind, and the sort of task that Dantioch had performed a hundred times before.

Nevertheless, he was troubled. Things had changed, his primarch not least among them. Behind Perturabo's cold facade, Dantioch sensed a hint of desperation. And the primarch was not alone in this change - the Iron Warriors as a whole were becoming harder, more callous, less caring of their own lives and of the lives of those they were supposed to protect.

Sergeant Zolan was a loyal warrior, perhaps one of the few like Dantioch who saw this turning of the tide and sensed the trouble it brought, but he had too much iron in him; his plain-speaking had kept him from captaincy. Still, Dantioch was glad of this lone, forthright voice, even though he could never join his to it in support, despite privately agreeing with much of what the sergeant said.

The spirit of his Legion had dimmed, burned out by a century of brutal sieges and thankless garrison work far from the glorious fronts of the Great Crusade.

And now this - a deployment into nowhere Dantioch could see that in a hundred years, five hundred years maybe, the worlds of the Sak'trada Deeps might become important to the Imperium - they were rich in minerals, but so were many millions more that were closer to the border and not infested with time-warping xenos. They were so far away from the Imperium's edge The feeble stars of the subsector lacked any of the rare and precious Terran-analogue worlds

that mankind so coveted. As far as the Sak'trada Deeps were concerned, miserable Gholghis was a paradise.

Obviously, the hrud were devilish creatures. They could not be allowed to survive, especially in such great numbers. Dantioch understood that. But it did not account for why they must die now. Containment would have been the rational option.

That was the cause of Dantioch's unease: the lack of logic to the expedition. The whole campaign looked, on the surface, to be pointless, though Dantioch was not a warrior to see the surface of anything - be it metal, stone or an idea - and judge it upon that merit alone And so, in the darker hours, he ruminated on the Legion's purpose in the Sak'trada Deeps. He could find no explanation that satisfied him save one, and that concerned him so greatly that, though he gave it no real credence, it dogged him through the nights and the days.

It was this: if one wished to wage a campaign to break a Legion's spirit, it would be a campaign like this.

The Iron Warriors lived up to the metal they took their name from in every way: strong versatile and hard. But iron required care like any other thing. Poorly forged iron might shatter when hit by a precise blow.

Dantioch had challenged their orders, but Perturabo was too proud to question commands from Terra, too bloody-minded to stand against them and pronounce them wrong. His primarch's greatest failing was his inability to engage, to stand up and say no. He would rather sulk. Perturabo was a genius afflicted by ego.

Nevertheless, things had been proceeding well until the nightly hrud transits began. A migration was building almost certainly a reaction to the Iron Warriors' presence in the sector. All the signs were there Strange lights in the sky. Ships that appeared and vanished. Incursions of hrud on the surface - alone at first, and always near the sites of the destroyed warrens, but then more of them, groups following the watercourse, and lately armed soldier-caste intruding inside the fortress itself.

Dantioch left the parapet and headed towards the wall gate. Made only months ago, the fortress had the look of something thousands of years old, its walls aged unnaturally quickly under the influence of the time-warping auras of the hrud. The legionaries manning the fortress, were not immune to this effect either. Supposedly immortal, Dantioch felt age in his bones. An annoying tickle in his chest threatened to turn into a cough with every breath. His hair, previously jet black, had thinned and greyed around the temples. Even Zolan dared not voice the fear that they were dying by degree; none of them could, but they were

Dantioch looked up at the sky. The pathetic pearl drop of the sun, weak enough to stare at directly, was sinking away into the west. He hurried within towards the armoury, dismissing the aches in his joints with an act of will.

The hrud always came at night, and night was fast approaching.

THREE

TIME AND IRON

999.M30
GUGANN, SAK'TRADA DEEPS

Fortreidon felt the hrud before he saw them.

Their influence plucked at the fabric of space-time itself. The strange quickening that surrounded them altered the composition of the atmosphere, thickening it with accelerated particular motion. Light shifted its hue subtly towards the blue end of the spectrum as it was sped on past its natural limit.

But the worst and most telling indication of their presence was the heat. The tunnel became suddenly stifling.

That was the sign that there were hrud nearby, always.

Andos Fan, scouting thirty metres ahead of the main body of the 165th Company, 16th Grand Battalion, stopped at a branching in the tunnel and held up his hand, signalling a halt. Vox clicks and battlesign passed down the line, halting the warriors. They waited tensely in the dark in two lines either side of the tunnel, the light reflecting feebly from the edges of their dull steel armour. It was not in the nature of the Iron Warriors to be cautious in battle, but fighting the hrud had taught them many hard lessons, one being the use of point men like Fan. Better one of them age rapidly to dust in the temporal vortex of a time-mine

than all of them.

'*Got a temperature spike*,' voxed Fan. '*A big one*.'

'*Lend me your eyes*, *brother*,' replied Captain Anabaxis, his voice carrying to the whole company.

Fan steeled himself before he obliged, leaning back against the wall with his bolter ready before ducking round the smooth corner and peering about, Anabaxis sharing the view through his auto-senses. Fan leaned back.

The captain's vox clicked in the ears of his men as he switched to a private channel, leaving his company to wait upon his orders.

Fortreidon battled to master himself. He doubted the others in the Seventh Tactical Squad felt the same trepidation he did. He wouldn't call it fear exactly, but the hrud were unnerving creatures to fight. This was his first campaign, and only his third battle. The deep scars where the Apothecaries had cored his flesh to implant his neural plugs still ached at night. His breath thundered in a helmet that still felt foreign to him. Runes and data-screed that he had only just begun to master winked at him on his visor. His pulse was quick Six months of training and endless surgeries, now this. His head span at the rapid change in his circumstances: from a junior hoplon of Edifus to a legionary in one year.

Iron within, *iron without*, he thought.

His brothers were tense. Though they remained outwardly fearless, this war was taking its toll on them. They were close-mouthed, many quick to anger. This was not how he had imagined being a member of the Legion to be.

'What's the hold up?' asked Udermais.

'Circumspection,' said Genus Kellephon. He shifted his flamer and fuel sloshed in its tank. Fortreidon found the constant hiss of its pilot light calming. Kellephon was kinder than the others, and Fortreidon was glad of his proximity.

'Damn circumspection - we should get in there and kill them all now,' said Jaseron Zankator, whom they called Mauler for reasons that were plainly evident to anyone who had fought alongside him in the line.

'Tepheus curse us, I wager there's an archive there,' muttered Harrakis. 'What's that mean?' asked Fortreidon cautiously. The others were irritated by his ignorance. He would not let that stop him asking questions. He would die if he did not learn.

'It means resistance, lad, that's what,' said Bardan. Though a dour character, he was more understanding of Fortreidon's position than most, though not so helpful as Kellephon. 'Better be ready for a hard fight. They'll die by the dozen to protect their precious books. This is going to cost us dearly.'

Bardan's pessimism was unwarranted. The vox clicked again as Anabaxis re-engaged the company channel.

'*I see at least three of them. We've taken them unawares. Squad Seven, it is your turn to take the lead. Fan, you are relieved. Squads Six and Twelve, stand ready to support Seven. Three and Four, to the rearguard. Sergeants, listen.*' His company-wide broadcast ceased again. Anabaxis was an emotionless leader, fonder of squad numbers than the names his troops gave their units. Kellephon said he had changed, consciously modelling himself on the primarch. Bardan said he'd always been that way.

'Remember, Fortreidon,' said Meson Dentrophor darkly, 'the more of these xenos scum we kill, the sooner we can be back to a proper war. Try not to die.'

'Digging. Sieges. We all wished for variety, brothers,' said Bardan, racking a bolt into the chamber of his weapon. 'Be wary of wishes.'

'Silence,' said Vodan Zhalsk, the sergeant of Squad Seven. He spoke distractedly, listening to his superior on a direct vox-link. 'We are to go now. Move out.'

They advanced the thirty metres to the branching, silent but for the muffled thud of their boots and the whine of their armour systems. The hrud were insatiable diggers, tunnelling hundreds of kilometres of tubular warrens through the rock of the planets they dominated. How they did it was open to conjecture. The Iron Warriors had found nothing that resembled digging machines. The walls were uneven but glassily surfaced, seemingly impervious to the constant tremors that beset hrud worlds. They rose and fell slightly, twisting about like the guts of an immense creature As they approached the branching a temperature indicator blinked on Fortreidon's visor display. The coolant system of his backpack rumbled into higher gear. He felt dislocated. His comrades moved unnaturally quickly.

Time was running ahead of itself.

Zhalsk directed his squad to flank the branching either side of the entrance The hrud rarely used doors. Each chamber and tunnel of their warrens ran into the next.

The way bulged into a large chamber filled with racks of hollow honeycomb shelving made from some kind of resin. Sheets of cured mycelium were stacked in roughly half of them. The rest were empty, their papers removed and stacked on the floor or in odd leaf-shaped things that had no understandable purpose.

Fortreidon was at the front Zhalsk was testing him, but it did not concern him unduly. He had to prove himself to his new comrades. The squad had been

devastated - already understrength when the invasion of Gugann had commenced, half the remainder had died in this one campaign. Although no stranger to high casualties, the strain was getting to the Iron Warriors. They resented Fortreidon for being alive in the place of their deceased brothers. It was natural. He did not begrudge them.

In any case, his continued existence might not be an issue for much longer.

'The archive was lit by non-directional light that came from nowhere, dim as the hrud liked it This place is a mess,' said Udermais.

'They're clearing it out,' said Zhalsk. '*We've* got them on the run.'

'Anyone see them?' asked Bardan. They all spoke quietly over vox. If the hrud detected them, their service to the Emperor would end prematurely.

'There, at the back of the room,' said Dentrophor. He dipped his bolter towards the far side of the archive, where another entrance, slightly offset from theirs, opened up.

Fortreidon squinted into the gloom. The hrud were almost impossible to spot behind the entropic fields generated by their bizarre biology. The break in time's flow acted like a lens, bending light around them. When they were stationary, they were virtually invisible. When they moved they seemed to traverse space without crossing it, flickers of black at the heart of a column of shimmering air. Sight was rarely the most reliable way to detect them.

Zhalsk directed Fortreidon's attention to a blur in the corner. A twisting ribbon of black danced behind it. Fortreidon switched to thermal imaging, and the world bloomed with confusing false colours. The entropic effects of the hrud caused massive heat bleed from the environment. The creature swelled into a throbbing mass of hot yellows and reds. If he aimed for the middle, he should kill it.

They sighted the other two. The Seventh Tactical Squad selected their targets. Zhalsk held up three fingers… then two… then one. 'Now,' he voxed.

They opened fired. Fortreidon kept his aim on the centre of his target. He flicked back and forth between true vision and thermal. He couldn't be sure if he hit either way. In a normal view, the slash of shadow that was the hrud leaped about; in thermal vision, its position was obscured by the thermal bloom of overclocked atomic activity, but it was easier to keep track of where it was.

Bolts streaked at the alien. Upon encountering the thing's time field, they sped on to unbelievable speeds, or they detonated prematurely as the explosive inside the munition decayed, or they came apart in rains of metal atoms. The effect of the hrud on their surroundings was unpredictable. A Space Marine stood close by one might age a thousand years in a minute, and yet his comrade be

unaffected. The hrud's own artefacts seemed immune.

The creature fell, finally hit, and the whirling distortion around it blinked out. Fortreidon let out a shout of exhilaration. Mankind would rule the stars, and he would play his part in ensuring it was so.

Other hrud fell. Their bodies were already in the process of disintegration as they hit the ground. Thick vapours poured from them, acidic and stinking. Fortreidon's breathing grille slid shut.

'Advance!' roared Zhalsk. Over the company vox, Anabaxis ordered Six and Twelve to follow and cover.

Fortreidon was barely aware of his brothers. He ran forwards with Harrakis, the two of them working together to cover the aisles between the strange shelves one after the other. Kellephon trailed him. Zhalsk ordered them to halt.

'Are they all dead?' said Udermais. 'Seems too easy.'

'Something's wrong,' said Harrakis. He peered around the edge of the archive stack and snatched himself back, choking. His bolter fell to the ground in pieces, and he held up his hands, staring at them, not believing what was happening to him.

'More of them!' he gasped. The bare ceramite of his gauntlets was pitting, as if left out in the elements for five thousand years. They crumbled around his hands, exposing the flesh within. It wrinkled and sagged. Muscles melted away, fingers became knotted with degenerative disease. His skin thinned and became liver spotted, and his veins stood out blue, the pulse in them weakening by the moment.

Harrakis' screams became hideous gurgles. He fell down, dust pouring from the rents opening up in his armour.

Harrakis death took place in less than a second. Fortreidon backed away, bolter raised. His armour clanged out warnings as the temperature rose around him. The paint on his pauldrons blistered and began to flake. The flawless iron colour of the unpainted ceramite dulled as oxidisation pocks appeared on it. Systems juddered as they underwent a century of decay. His hearts pounded. Death approached. As he retreated, he looked down the aisle. Three hrud approached, tendrils of wavering air reaching out towards him.

'Get down!' yelled Kellephon.

Fortreidon dived to the side as a swelling cloud of fire roared up the aisle. Fighting the weight and awkwardness of his battleplate, he rolled onto his side in time to see the xenos die.

Flames flickered into an insane, jerking dance around the creatures. The

consumption of oxygen was radically accelerated by the hrud's entropic fields, and the fires burned themselves out quickly.

It was not enough to save the xenos. Genus Kellephon squeezed his trigger again, sending another blast of flame over the aliens. Their stinking, layered robes steamed under the assault of burning promethium, igniting suddenly as their moisture boiled off and they reached combustion temperature.

A dying hrud screamed like nothing should. The sound of it brought to mind the last, ticking seconds of a world's life, or the ultimate exhaustion of the final star. It was the death scream of time itself.

Their long, flexible limbs flailed, sending spattering arcs of promethium up the walls of their burrow. These landed on layered sheets of mycelium paper, burning into them. The archive began to smoulder.

The rest of the Seventh gathered at the end of the aisle, taking up firing positions.

'Fire!' bellowed Zhalsk.

The Iron Warriors sent a storm of bolts into the hrud. They detonated violently, their flexible limbs coming apart and scattering vertebrae-like bones across the floor. The last of the time fields went out. The hrud curled on the floor, sinews tightening. The inferno burned so fast that they blurred into a standing wall of light. In seconds the fires rendered the bodies into ash, and the flame walls dropped. The hrud's time-warping powers failed. The dread touch of entropy slipped from Fortreidon's being as the xenos collapsed into nothing.

The passage of time crashed nauseatingly back to its proper speed. Jaseron Zankator toed a skull that had escaped the worst of the fire. Ash sifted from its large eye sockets. A mandible fell loose from the mouth and clicked on the floor.

'Ugly,' spat Zankator. He stamped the skull to powder, checked his weapon and slammed in a fresh magazine. Zhalsk and Udermais swept their auspexes around. The others spread out into a covering pattern as the following squads advanced, warriors splitting into pairs to check each aisle 'Clear!' bellowed Zhalsk.

The remainder of the Iron Warriors clattered into the archive. Meson helped Fortreidon to his feet.

'Are you hale?' he asked.

Fortreidon felt shaky, but signed that he was well. He felt no different, but he would have aged. He had seen men withered into helpless living cadavers. The hrud's powers gave the lie to the supposed immortality of Space Marines.

Fire was already taking root in the library. Captain Anabaxis stalked down the

central way, grabbed Kellephon by the pauldron and yanked on it hard. Murder simmered in his voice. 'Wait until the Tarantulas are set up, then burn it. Burn every last scrap of it. Bring them running.'

'That's not the plan, brother-captain,' said Sergeant Zhalsk. 'The primarch ordered us to advance and engage from the south.'

'The plan's changed,' said Anabaxis. 'We'll draw them off our lord's position. If we kill them here or there, he will not care, so long as they are dead. This is my judgement and you will obey.

'Any more dissent from you, Zhalsk, and I'll have you back in the line.' He turned away from the Seventh Squad. 'Hurry! Get the sentry guns in place. They'll be coming here in force to save their stinking archives.'

Anabaxis surveyed the hall, crammed from floor to ceiling with groaning shelves.

'Scavengers,' he said hatefully. He went to the library-burrow entrance, where three Space Marines worked swiftly to deploy a pair of twin-las Tarantulas. They were not working fast enough for Anabaxis' liking. 'Now, Demeos, now! Unless you want me to send you on point to bear the brunt of the temporal storm in place of these machines! Get them lined up on the far tunnel. We shall gun them down as they enter.'

Whooping calls echoed from the far entrance.

Udermais turned to shout back up the aisle. 'Hurry! They are coming!'

Anabaxis cursed. 'Defensive positions. Kellephon, burn it now!' Promethium washed out from the flamer, turning the small fires burning in the archive into a roaring blaze.

Fortreidon took shelter between the stacks. Fire raged around him, heating his armour.

Into the inferno the hrud came, shrieking woe, agitated by the loss of their books. They moved quickly, propelling themselves on one long arm and their two legs, deadly plasma fusils held in their free hands. There were at least a dozen of them, their entropic fields overlaying one another, buckling the air in front of them so that they appeared as if viewed from behind a fall of water.

Fortreidon caught tiny, clear sights of them, but only ever parts, never the whole. Their long arms whipped about in a way no human limb could. Ghastly faces glared at him with unbounded hatred. Stinking robes covered their bodies. Fleeting sights - the hrud were deceptive shadows behind the glassy air for the most part. Even now he had little idea of what they actually looked like. All he had was a patchwork of glimpses.

The Tarantulas' machine-spirits registered the hrud's presence and opened fire The laser shots hit the entropic fields of the enemy. Sped up past all physical constraints, the light exploded, tearing two of the creatures apart. The guns fired again. Another hrud went down less dramatically, four neat holes burned through its concealing layers.

The Iron Warriors added their fire to that of the sentry guns, filling the archive with a wall of flaring mass-reactive rounds. To a warrior not experienced in combat against the hrud, such an expenditure of ammunition would have seemed overkill, but it was necessary. The room throbbed to the sound of bolts exploding prematurely. Propellant burned instantly. Bolts veered off course and impacted in the walls. The hrud neutralised or evaded so many of them. Arrogantly the xenos slowed, lowered their weapons and returned fire.

A green bolt of phasic plasma whickered through the air, its track uncertain as it blinked in and out of existence. It materialised inside a warrior of Squad Nine, punching out through his backplate and pack in a spray of blood and steam. He exploded as his suit reactor failed, shrapnel from his demise cutting down one of his fellows.

A furious exchange erupted. Iron Warriors fell all around Fortreidon. Shouts for aid struggled against the storm of bolter fire, though nobody cried out in pain - that was not the Iron Warriors' way. Bolts whooshed through thickening air. Smoke billowed up off the burning hrud books, washing over the ceiling. Liquid-thick, it cascaded down to the floor when it encountered the walls of the room. Soon Fortreidon's fellows were swallowed up in a black murk. Whether from hrud effect or the fire, the temperature rose intolerably high, triggering his suit alarms and driving Fortreidon from the meagre cover of the library stacks.

He moved cautiously, relying on his helm overlay to see him through the smoke. Without his battleplate's auto-senses he would have been blind. His armour kept the smoke outside, filling his lungs with pure air. Green blasts punched through the smoke one way, lascannon beams and bolt shots the other. Tourbillons twisted around the paths of each. His armour beeped a warning as a stray bolt-round spanked off one of his greaves.

Fortreidon slowed, scanning the smoke apprehensively.

A green flash, and something slammed into the side of his helm, showering his face with molten metal. His suit systems wailed. His vox fizzed and died. Smoke poured through the rent in his faceplate, and he gasped from the pain of his cooking flesh, unwittingly drawing a great lungful of poisoned air into his chest. It burned his lungs, and he choked. His multi-lung went into action, cramping his

birth lungs as it unfolded, driving out the poisonous air. When he breathed again, it was with this blessed gift. He was no longer suffocating, though the air singed his throat still.

Someone grabbed his elbow, and yanked him forwards.

They passed under a ventilation shaft funnelling the smoke up out of the archive. The air on the far side was clearer. Fortreidon blinked. The mushy remains of dead hrud stained the floor. He threw himself down amidst them, panting hard.

'Rest,' said Meson Dentrophor. 'Get your breath. Your vox-link is malfunctioning?'

Fortreidon nodded dumbly.

'Let us get your helmet off.' Demrophor locked his bolter to his thigh and pulled out a hex key from his belt. Deftly he undid the bolts holding the remains of Fortreidon's neck seals to his battleplate.

'Mark II armour,' he said disdainfully. He examined the wrecked helm, judged it unsalvagable and tossed it aside. 'We are overdue a supply of the newer marks.' He reached out and hauled Fortreidon to his feet. 'Iron within,' he said.

'Iron without,' responded Fortreidon. His throat felt full of razors.

The fire was burning out in the archive. Iron Warriors stamped out of the thinning smoke victoriously, but a dozen at least lay dead. Apothecaries moved in from the rear, reductor blades spraying blood as they bit into flesh. Techmarines were already packing up the Tarantulas at the rear. Fortreidon coughed ropy phlegm, streaked black - blood, fyceline, fire, smoke and the spoilt stink of disintegrating hrud made the air barely breathable.

'Move out!' Captain Anabaxis' voice boomed from his vox emitter. His helm crest was singed, and his armour smeared in soot and blood. 'There are many more xenos to kill, and the primarch is waiting for his victory.'

FOUR

DIALECTICA

800.M30
LOCHOS, OLYMPIA

There came a day when the tyrant-prince Adophus from Kardis visited Dammekos of Lochos. Dammekos wished to discuss alliance with his fellow ruler. Adophus had no intention of entering into any alliance, but the boy Perturabo's repute had spread. Wanting to see the prodigy of Lochos himself, Adophus had accepted Dammekos' invitation.

He and Dammekos sat in matching thrones in the Great Library of Lochos. By that time, Perturabo had been with Dammekos a year and had grown greatly. Already he was the size of a youth in the last stages of childhood. In truth, he was only seven years old, though it would be a few more years before Perturabo calculated his actual age. For the entertainment of Adophus, he sat surrounded by a circle of learned men from both Kardis and Lochos, drawing quickly upon an easel with a steel-nibbed pen and ink.

The year was hot, and the two tyrants sat surrounded by frames carrying wet sheets chilled by snow brought down from the mountaintops. Peons, the spoils of Olympia's endless wars, wafted air cooled by the sheets over them with fans made of stonehawk feathers. Golden bowls piled with delicacies were situated at

their sides. More slaves bearing tall amphorae of wine waited to refresh them. Adophus drank freely; it was among his many boastful claims that he could keep his wits when other men had drunk theirs away. Dammekos sipped sparingly and nibbled at an apple, making it last an uncommonly long time.

'Among Perturabo's many feats, I have a few favourites,' said Dammekos conversationally. 'Did you know, he learned the entirety of Hrastor of Epherium's *Dialectica* by heart in a week, all fifty volumes? He then annotated them and sent them back to Hrastor.'

'Really?' said Adophus. He held up his goblet for more wine. It was duly filled.

Dammekos nodded. 'Hrastor came here himself, though he is well into his eighties and had vowed never to travel beyond the walls of Epherium again. Upon meeting Perturabo, he pronounced himself unimpressed. Thereafter the two of them engaged in debate for ten days. Hrastor said he had never met with such a keen mind. He offered to teach Perturabo at his gymnasium. Perturabo declined, after which Hrastor departed in ill spirits.'

'A youth will never leave a home he is happy in, Dammekos. He must be pushed to excel. You indulge him, I suppose.'

Dammekos frowned. 'Happy? I doubt that he is ever happy. He is an intense boy. No, it was his choice. You see, he declined to go because he said Hrastor had nothing to teach him!'

Adophus laughed loudly. The silence shivered with the noise. Many of the assembled wise men glanced at him distractedly, then turned their attention back to Perturabo's drawing. They nodded and whispered to themselves, amazed at the boy's skills.

All part of the show, thought Adophus cynically.

He kept an eye on Perturabo's hands at all times, alive to the possibility of substitution. It was preposterous to think that this hulking man was a boy. The whole thing was a hoax, and Adophus was angry at the wasted visit.

'Hrastor is a pompous ideologue. I am glad his ego took a nudge,' said Adophus.

'But it was not just Hrastor,' said Dammekos. 'Demonius, Adrakastor, Heplon… Every one of the Nine Sophists of Pellekontia. Well…' he touched Adophus' arm gently, 'I exaggerate - it was those of the Nine that condescended to meet him. Your Antibus was one that declined to come. I can't speak for him, but personally, I think the others are afraid of Perturabo. I apologise that I have no mind of such quality to demonstrate Perturabo's thinking in the battle of wits. Wise men who are willing to stake their reputations on debate with him are

becoming harder to find,' he said, with transparently false regretfulness.

'A pity,' said Adophus with an equal lack of sincerity. He refused to be distracted, and kept his eyes and thoughts fixed on the boy.

'Oh, don't worry. I managed to find someone. A priest of Faralkis. Priests give good sport - they have such a sense of rectitude.'

'What kind of name is Perturabo anyway?' said Adophus. 'It's not Olympian. It's unseemly.'

'Who knows what names the gods give their gifts?' said Dammekos.

'Don't spin me that yam, Dammekos,' said Adophus. 'If you genuinely believe him to be a gift from the heights of Mount Telephus, I'll give you the damn key to the Great Gates of Kardis myself.'

Dammekos shrugged and took another mouselike bite of his apple. 'The boy claims it is a name from Old Earth itself.'

'Another myth,' said Adophus. 'I'd be careful. He could be a spy, a vanguard of the Black Judges maybe. My soothsayers say we are overdue a tribute visit.'

'He is not of their make, I think. I believe that is… Ah,' he said, motioning at the boy, 'I see he is done.'

Perturabo stood back from his work and examined it closely for a moment. Finding it satisfactory, he took it from its easel and brought it to the two lords, the back of the paper held towards the tyrant and the prince Adophus shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny of the boy's ice-blue eyes.

'Go on then, Perturabo, my boy, show our guest your work - don't keep him waiting,' said Dammekos.

Perturabo flipped the sheet so that Adophus could see the drawing on the other side The prince leaned forwards in amazement. There was a perfect likeness of his own face, drawn in tight cross-hatched lines of ink. It was art in a style he had never seen before but which captured him uncannily. It would have taken a skilled artist a genius, hours to do the same A cold shiver ran down his back.

'I do not believe it,' he said. He glanced at Perturabo. 'You did this in ten minutes?'

'That is how long it took,' said Perturabo. He looked at Dammekos, puzzled. 'You were both watching. Ten minutes, as you asked, my lord.'

'He is rather literal-minded, I'm afraid,' said Dammekos apologetically. 'There is no trickery here. Art is but one of his many talents. Already he is showing promise as an architect and an engineer, not to mention his abstract mathematical skills. It is in rhetoric that he excels, however.'

Adophus looked at Perturabo doubtfully.

'He really does come into his own in debate. Give him the picture Perturabo,' said Dammekos. 'It is a gift, Adophus.'

Perturabo handed the prince the paper. Adophus tilted it from left to right. 'The ink glistens. It is still wet. How was this done? Tell me, Dammekos, and I may forgive you for tricking me. The deception is a marvel. You may count me satisfied if you reveal your methods…'

'I understand your suspicion,' said Dammekos, 'but I assure you that it is no trick. It was done exactly as you saw, by Perturabo in these last ten minutes. I will have him display his architectural drawings after the feast, as they are quite impressive, but I am sure this next demonstration will lay any doubt to rest that you may have regarding his intellectual ability.' Dammekos clapped his hands. 'Bring in the priest!'

Perturabo took his leave without asking permission; though he was a man in appearance, he sauntered back to his chair with the awkward, insolent gait of an adolescent. The easel was whisked away. A moment later, a man with the flowing hair and multicoloured cloak of the Faralkian cult was brought in. He held his right arm up, the cloak folded over it decorously. He bowed to the tyrants.

'My lords,' he said, 'I am the priest Rodask of Byzellion.'

'You are here to debate with the boy,' said Adophus.

'No, my lord,' said Rodask confidently. 'I am here to convince him of the existence of the gods.'

Adophus mouth quirked into a harsh smile. 'A gift of the gods who does not believe in the gods? How droll, Dammekos.'

'By all means begin,' said Dammekos to the priest. He looked knowingly at Adophus and settled back into his chair.

Rodask gave the crowd a beaming smile, the sort worn by men who are certain they have stumbled upon the singular truth of the universe 'You are the one called Perturabo?' he said. Rodask paced back and forth as he spoke, his arm held before him, the folds of his multicoloured cloak swaying.

'I am,' said the youth.

'I hear it said you state there are no gods.'

Perturabo shook his head. 'I said that I have no *proof* that there are gods. That is not a statement of fact. It is a hypothesis.'

'Do you admit you disregard the divine in saying so?'

'I do no such thing,' said Perturabo. His voice was still high, but assured. 'I merely test your assumption that there are gods. If there are gods, then I will

prove it to be so by testing this hypothesis, along with any other hypotheses that might arise from it by dint of a progression in sophistication of my theorising. Surely any god, if he exists, would be pleased by such effort. If they do exist, I shall take myself to their presence by climbing Mount Telephus, where I shall bow to them. If they do not exist, well, there is nothing to offend.'

The crowd found this amusing. Perturabo scowled at them. He had not intended to be funny.

'The existence of the gods is self-substantiating,' said the priest softly. 'They require no proof. Their evidence is present all around us, in the stone of the ground, in the patterns of the rain, in the rising of the sun. What of yourself?'

'The things you list are evidence of the things' existence, not of their provenance, and less so of their exact ontological status,' said Perturabo. 'The things you see are real - the sun, the rain, myself. That is true.'

'Do you hear, believers?' the priest addressed the crowd. 'Our prodigy acknowledges the work of the gods, but not the gods themselves. Consider this. A man has for sale a bolt of cloth made in a far away land which he has never visited nor indeed heard of. It was made by the hands of a person of whom he has no knowledge, speaking a language which he could not know, in a city of whose long and complex history he is entirely ignorant. You buy this cloth. Because you have not met the man who made it, does this mean the doth does not exist?'

Perturabo shook his head. 'Your reasoning is poor.'

'How so?' said the priest, his face a picture of open, holy innocence.

'It is correct to assume that a bolt of doth is made by a human agent, because all bolts of doth we might come across are made by human beings. Ergo, it is reasonable that all bolts of doth are made by people and not, say, talking leonids.'

The crowd laughed again. Perturabo found the reaction less offensive this time.

'Our doth has been carried from trader to trader,' he continued, 'and at some point a human agent bought the doth from another human agent. Therefore, the existence of the initial manufacturer can ultimately be proven.'

'So by extension, the rain is real, the sun is real, you are real, so the gods are real,' said the priest. The crowd murmured appreciatively.

'It is fallacious to carry that assumption to the rain,' said Perturabo, 'and say that supernatural entities are responsible. The first object - the rain - is produced by processes unknown to us, though I suspect that it is owing to the action of the sun upon the sea, and the condensation of the vapours produced therefrom in the atmosphere. The latter - the gods - are unknowable. We might well believe a

man who met a man who bought doth in a city we do not personally know is telling the truth. It is another matter entirely to believe a man who says a man he knows knew a man who met a god.

'I could, should I wish, retrace the steps of the bolt of doth to its point of origin. I might even find the man who made it. Our nature dictates our curiosity. It is in our nature to invent a story for our bolt of doth, but all such suppositions are, to a lesser or greater degree, verifiable. Similarly, you tell stories of the gods to make sense of the patterns you see. That is commendable, but they cannot be proved. Religion is not a rigorous discipline. Myths are not verifiable, therefore they are flawed.'

'We are rigorous in our worship,' said the priest.

'But not in your thinking,' replied Perturabo. 'The better way would not be to impute divine origin for the world around you. It is one possibility among several.'

'What is the truth then? What is the truth of the sun?'

'I have yet to determine it exactly,' said Perturabo. 'However, in this library I have read many older texts—'

'Blasphemous texts,' interrupted the priest.

'*Older* texts,' asserted Perturabo calmly, 'that state the sun is a star, akin to the other stars in the skies, which are themselves suns made small by distance My own calculations have proven these writings to be correct.'

'And what did you base these calculations upon?' said the priest with a sneer.

'The formulae of Dennivhor Astrokon,' said Perturabo.

'Those are calculations intended to give correct proportions according to the laws of perspective,' said the priest. 'An artist's tools.'

'The tools of art and science are the same. Everything is pan of one whole The thinking of Olympia is imperfect in that it is divisive Your philosophers are preoccupied with classification. Classification imposes divisions on the whole that is the physical and metaphysical world. These divisions are artificial and unhelpful. The tool becomes the determiner of the nature of a thing, thus preventing knowledge of the thing itself.'

'And you?' said the priest 'You are surely proof of the gods. There is no other like you. You were born of no human mother!'

'I believe you are correct,' said Perturabo. 'I have become convinced that I am the product of design, not of nature My abilities are too many, my difference from other men too profound for it to be any other way.'

'Yet you insist the gods did not make you. Who did?'

'I am a bolt of doth,' said Perturabo. 'One day I will find the one who wove me I am certain that he or she was no god.'

'Such things are beyond men!' said the priest incredulously.

'Once they were not,' said Perturabo.

Listening to the exchange Adophus leaned in to Dammekos and softly whispered, 'How old did you say he was?'

'Rumours of him came to Lochos two years ago,' replied Dammekos as Perturabo carried on speaking. 'There was nothing before that. I suspect he is no more than a handful of years old.'

'Impossible!' said Adophus, looking at the rangy, hard-muscled young man.

'Everything about this boy is impossible,' said Dammekos. 'Watch.'

The priest had by now become a little less composed. 'Your arguments are blasphemous,' he was saying. 'Do you not fear for your soul?'

'If I have a soul,' said Perturabo. 'That is another thing I can neither touch nor see, another unverifiable object taken as an article of faith. That is a debate for another day. I have nothing to fear. My reading of your histories show that all punishments for blasphemy have been meted out by men, and not the gods - those in the *Mythica* aside, and it cannot be trusted. I thus deduce with complete confidence that no divine being will reach out to smite me.'

'The faithful will punish you,' said the priest, his beatific attitude slipping further.

Perturabo cocked an eyebrow. 'Again, the action of men, not gods. And I defy any man to dare.'

'He will bring doom on Lochos!' said the priest, directly to the crowd. 'Famine, war. These will be the fruits of this poison tree!'

'You act as demagogue now? That is a defining characteristic of a man in the wrong. If there is to be famine, it will be because of multiple interrelated factors coming together to produce the inevitable outcome of hunger - the weather, poor farming techniques, the skewing of the amount of land under tillage by economic considerations, the dispossession of the poor by the avarice of the rich. Not because I angered a being who does not exist.'

'You say your blasphemy is a hypothesis,' said the priest. 'You swing towards certainty without proof.'

Perturabo smiled coldly, an expression far too old and reptilian for his youthful face. 'I have the courage of my convictions. I do not yet know I am right, but I am certain I will not be punished, and you will look foolish.'

The crowd laughed. The priest became angry.

Perturabo thought a moment. 'You cannot be blamed for your ignorance. Allow me a metaphor. Imagine a cave, wherein men are imprisoned throughout their lives. They are chained to a wall, unable to see the mouth of the cave, but they face another wall that does face the entrance. A fire bums at the mouth of this cave, day and night. Shadows are cast by the things of the wider world that pass to and fro in front of the cave. These shadows are cast upon the wall and viewed by the imprisoned men—'

'I do not see how this relates to the gods,' interrupted the priest.

'Listen, and I will illuminate you. You deal in stories, so I am telling you one.' Again the crowd laughed. Perturabo smiled at his effect on them, for had intended to be humorous and was beginning to enjoy their laughter, so long as it was not directed at him. The shadows are all the prisoners see They give them names, and they guess at their nature. The shadows are their world. The objects that cast the shadows are real, as is the light, but the true nature of either thing cannot be inferred from the shadows. Nevertheless, they exist, though the prisoners are in ignorance of them. This is the state you are in. You see part of something real - the shadow - and infer what you can about its essence. In your case, it is the gods.

'Then, one day, a single prisoner is taken from the cave,' continued Perturabo. 'He sees the fire. It hurts his eyes. He cannot see the objects clearly for the pain, and they are but silhouettes against the blaze. But he is told that these articles are the reality of the objects he has seen, and the shadows only a by-product of their actuality. But because he cannot perceive the solid objects - his eyes hurt, the fire dazzles and he has little frame of reference for what he sees - he does not believe what he is told. All he sees is their blackness against the firelight. To save himself from agony, he turns back to what he knows and flees into the cave. His pain gone, and having seen the fire, he perceives the shadows more clearly than before and regards their truth to be absolute. He knows a little of the true nature of things now, but dare not probe further for fear of the pain. In this way, a little truth is worse than none.

'But imagine the prisoner is dragged bodily from the cave once more, and now up into the light of the full sun. There he suffers untold agonies until, slowly at first, his eyes adjust to the day. He then sees solid objects and the shadows they cast. Finally, he understands the true nature of shadows, and that there must be three things to enable him to see - himself, the object and light. See how far he has come from the shadows! Eventually, he can look up into the sky, and maybe also at the very sun. Only then can he contemplate the nature of the world

beyond. He realises that the world is another cave, and the sun another fire, and if he wishes to learn more he must travel further.'

The audience listened in silence. Adophus was spellbound. Even the priest had ceased his bluster.

Perturabo had not finished. 'But you cannot learn from this,' he said to the priest.

'How so?' asked the priest.

'Because you are one of the prisoners still within the cave. Gripped with excitement, the man rushes back into the cave to tell his fellows of the truth of the world. But his eyes are now adapted to the day, and he can no longer see the shadows that entrance his fellows still. They, lacking any other point of reference, regard his revelations of the truth as madness, and his blindness to their shadows an affliction. Thus, they deem the outside world as harmful. They kill the man to stop his madness, and they resolve to destroy any other person that would remove them from the cave.' Perturabo's face darkened. 'And so you priests inflict death on those who disagree with you in order to preserve your comforting ignorance.'

Gasps ran through the crowd, some of them appreciative, others horrified.

'You arrogant youth,' said the priest. 'I see what you are doing. You want to turn the city against the gods by setting yourself as this man who knows the truth.'

'That was not his intention,' murmured Dammekos at this accusation. He toyed with his ring of office. Adophus frowned at him, but the tyrant had forgotten his guest for the moment.

'You are mistaken. I am not the man. I am the sun,' said Perturabo. 'I will burn your eyes until you see. I am the truth.'

'You are wrong! The gods will punish you!' The priest advanced on the youth. 'You will bring disaster upon this place, and if you persist, upon the whole world! Mark my words! Let it be recorded that I, Rodask of Byzellion, foretold this!'

Guards came to Rodask's side and took his elbows. Perturabo glared at him.

'I invite you to prove it,' he said.

The priest was dragged from the hall shouting. 'I have the gift of sight! The gods bless me! Do not listen to him!' he yelled. His shouts faded, and were cut off by the closing of the great doors to the library.

Perturabo stood and gave his audience a defiant stare. A patter of polite applause quickly died.

Adophus let out a long breath. 'Clever arguments are all very well, Dammekos,

but prodigies do not seal alliances. I have seen what I came to see. I am impressed, but there will not be an alliance between our cities.'

'No?' said Dammekos mildly. 'Well then, a final demonstration for you. Tell me, who is the mightiest warrior in your entourage?'

'What?'

'You heard my question. Who is the best killer you have?'

'You know full well that the champion Ortraxes Falk is my personal guardian. He is the mightiest.'

'We shall have him fight Perturabo,' said Dammekos.

'Have you lost your wits?' snorted Adophus. 'Ortraxes is the best warrior in Pellekontia!'

'I am aware of this - as aware of it, in fact, as you were aware that others have tested Perturabo's strength in a similar way.' He had finished his apple by now, and popped a candied cherry into his mouth. 'You brought Ortraxes with you for exactly that reason.'

Adophus gripped his chair and grinned.

'He will destroy your prodigy. What a waste! I am disappointed. This is not the wisdom I would have expected from the great Dammekos. I had expected you to back down when you discovered Ortraxes was in my party.'

'Why should I? You shall see A wager, perhaps?' Dammekos leaned towards his fellow ruler conspiratorially. 'If Perturabo wins, then you will accede to my terms of alliance and open trade between our cities. If he fails, you will be free to refuse Isn't that what you want?'

'You have to do better than that.' Adophus thought a moment. 'You will make no further attempts at alliance while I am on the throne, and you will provide our city with forty pounds of silver every year.'

'Done!' said Dammekos easily.

'No bargaining?' said Adophus.

'None,' replied Dammekos, somewhat smugly.

'Now I know you have lost your wits. I will not have the boy killed. He is too talented. Perhaps he might be convinced to come to Kardis by your lack of care for him.'

Dammekos shrugged. 'We shall see if he is killed. You will not sway him. He knows what is expected. Shall we proceed with the bout?'

Adophus drained his cup again. 'If you insist,' he said angrily. 'Ortraxes!'

Ortraxes ploughed his way through Dammekos' courtiers without apology. Very few of them needed encouragement to clear his path. Ortraxes was enormous for

an Olympian, over two metres tall. Unlike some men of unusual stature, who trade power for height, his limbs and torso bulged with muscle. He wore a modified version of the armour worn by Adophus' guards, with a livery of blue-stained leather and bronze. His breastplate was heavily embellished with relief work, the leather of his kilt carved intricately. His eyes were rimmed in kohl, and the well-oiled rings of his beard cascaded over his bulging chest in the Selenian style. Under one arm he carried a tall-crested helm.

'My lord,' he said in a voice deeper than oubliettes of Lochos.

'My lord Dammekos wishes you to fight the prodigy,' said Adophus.

Ortraxes turned to look at Perturabo. His wargear creaked like the too-small harness of a draft beast. 'The boy?' he said.

Perturabo glowered at him from under his broad forehead.

'If you can, do not hurt him. Much,' said Adophus gleefully, for he could see nothing but an easy victory ahead, with much benefit for his city, not least the humbling of the Tyrant of Lochos. 'He is too great a talent to waste.'

'No, no, make no special allowances on Perturabo's part,' said Dammekos airily.

Ortraxes looked from the boy to his lord and back.

'Very well,' said Adophus. 'Kill him.'

Ortraxes considered for a moment, then put on his helmet. The best warriors spurn over-confidence, and he was among the very best.

'As you wish,' he said, drawing his sword with an oily rasp.

'You will give no weapon to the boy?' said Adophus.

Dammekos put his hand to cover his mouth in mock secrecy. 'He doesn't need one,' he said in a stage whisper.

The first flickers of doubt crossed Adophus' face.

Ortraxes made a false move towards Perturabo, making as if to charge. Perturabo didn't move a muscle. Ortraxes made another display, holding out his arms and half-lunging. The boy looked unimpressed. Ortraxes chuckled appreciatively.

Then he did charge.

Almost too quickly to see, Perturabo sidestepped the giant man, tripping him with a foot and grabbing his backplate. With a hefty shove, he propelled the man forwards into a column. Ortraxes' helm rang like a bell.

He staggered back upright, pulled his dented helmet off and threw it down. Perturabo could have pressed the advantage, but he paced the growing circle in the crowd and waited for his foe to recover. Ortraxes hefted his weapon, shook his head and prepared to attack again.

Perturabo stamped hard on his chair, shattering it, and plucked up a stave from the frame.

'He will fight Ortraxes… with part of a *chair*?' said Adophus incredulously.

'He must feel threatened,' said Dammekos. 'He beat all my warriors bare-handed.'

Ortraxes roared and came for Perturabo. Despite his great size, Ortraxes was nimble and handled his sword expertly. He and Perturabo traded blows, the youth parrying the sword with his wooden stick. Twice he rapped Ortraxes hard on the side of the head. Splinters flew everywhere as the giant warrior struck again at the youth. The sword chopped through the wood, and Perturabo cast it away. He bent forwards, into a wrestler's crouch.

'Do you know, we have taught him none of this,' said Dammekos, unconcerned by his favourite engaging in combat, unarmed and unarmoured, against a man half his height again. 'His abilities are entirely innate.'

Adophus wasn't listening. The boy was humiliating his finest warrior and, by extent, the tyrant-prince himself. His jaw was clenched. 'Finish him, Ortraxes!' he shouted.

Perturabo swatted at Ortraxes' hand, sending the Kardian's sword spinning from his grasp, and jumped at him. The giant and Perturabo grappled. Ortraxes was enraged and had abandoned any attempt to hold himself back. He smashed his elbow across Perturabo's nose, breaking it with a wet crack. The youth was not bowed, and the flow of blood stopped almost immediately. Perturabo grabbed Ortraxes' wrist as he swung a dub-like fist at his head. The Champion of Kardis growled like a provoked leonid, but he could not overcome the boy's strength. His muscles bulged. His skin went red with the effort. Slowly, his grasping hand descended until, as the fingers brushed the bridge of Perturabo's swelling nose, the youth twisted, yanked hard and sent Ortraxes crashing into the ground.

The giant rolled over with impressive speed, but Perturabo's foot descended to meet him, breaking Ortraxes' nose in return and knocking him out cold. Perturabo dropped to his knees and drew back his fist to finish the job with a blow to the throat.

'Enough!' shouted Dammekos, his voice a little strained. Perturabo nodded and stepped back. Absentmindedly he re-broke his already set nose and pushed it back into place.

'By the gods,' said Adophus.

'I saw Perturabo as a gift from the gods,' said Dammekos, his light manner gone 'But as he tells us, there are no such things. Come forward, Perturabo,' he said,

beckoning to his foster-son. Adophus stood as Perturabo came to stand before the two lords. 'Here boy, let us drink to your victory.' Adophus held out his cup to the side. A serving girl filled it. He took a deep draught and offered it to Perturabo.

Perturabo just stared at him.

'He will not drink,' explained Dammekos.

'Why not?'

'Because Zhinnar of Sodalian tried to poison him with a cask of gifted wine Alas, this and other attempts on his life have made him suspicious of others. The other tyrants are so jealous of my foster-son.'

Adophus made a sour face, and a noise in his throat to accompany it. 'The day a man of Olympia loses his paranoia is the day he loses his life,' he said. 'Then I toast your good health, young Perturabo.'

He raised the cup and ostentatiously downed his wine. Perturabo gave him a level stare.

'So then,' said Dammekos with a triumphant smile, as Adophus' unconscious warrior was dragged away. 'Shall we discuss the terms of our alliance?'

FIVE

A QUESTION OF TIME

999.M30
THE *IRON BLOOD*, GUGANN ORBIT

The command chamber was one of the few places on the *Iron Blood* possessing windows, though even these were small, narrow lancet slits trapped between the vaulting iron beamwork. Iron skulls were stamped into the surfaces of the beams and the panels of the walls, their edges reflecting the dull light of the Sak'tradan suns and the lurid yellow of Gugann. It was a place devoid of human softness. Birds housed in cages dangling from the apex of each of the beams' arches brought a touch of the organic to the chamber's hardness, but their presence was an afterthought, or perhaps a lingering residue of something that had once been and had not quite perished.

Perturabo, primarch of the Iron Warriors, looked down upon the Mechanicum delegation framed before him by the three triarchs of his Trident. All members of the Mechanicum party had committed acts of gross self-mutilation upon their own bodies. They were a motley collection of machine parts and withered flesh, hideous chimerae draped in the black habits of the Odense forge masters, as if fine doth and neatly worked insignia could draw the eye away from what they had done to themselves.

None of them would have passed for a human being upon Olympia. One was a hulking thing with six arms, another a brain in a glass blister surrounded by legs. What infuriated Perturabo most about their disfigurements was that they had all been undertaken to further their misguided quest for knowledge. Misguided not for its aims, which Perturabo had once pursued so avidly himself, but for its means. The Mechanicum was a cult, chanting praises to a deaf god, and Perturabo had no time for cults or gods, regardless of what the Emperor allowed the Martians to believe. They chased the fruits of reason by abandoning it.

And they, like he, had wholly failed to find a solution to the problem of the hrud. They had made that clear enough.

'The xenos warrens are too deep to bomb,' Perturabo said. 'The entropy fields projected by their bodies ruin the flesh of my warriors and destroy their wargear. My new path of action offers us a chance of success. I speak to you as your warleader, master of this fleet and primarch of the Iron Warriors, appointed by the Emperor himself to this position and entrusted with the prosecution of this war. And you are sure enough of your position to stand before me and tell me that you will not do what I ask?'

Kilos The Unfettered - or 'the Brain in a Jar' as Triarch Forrix had dubbed him - clanked a step forwards. The disembodied organ drifted from side to side in the swirl of its nutrient fluids, and his limbs hissed as he resettled himself. If anything could be read from the positioning of the limbs of a cyborg pseudo-arachnid attached to a naked brain, Kilos was defiant. The Unfettered's sensor package drifted up from the cowl of his armourglass jar, and three yellow eyes of varying sizes came level with the primarch's own.

'We will not do as you ask because it will not work,' the magos said in a deep, disapproving voice. It was remarkably human-sounding for one so far gone from the path of flesh. 'Your premise that a stasis device of sufficient power will counteract the entropic field generated by the temporaferrox xenos strain is overly simplistic.

'We deem this theory inadequate and dangerous. It should not be acted upon.'

'Indeed?' said Perturabo darkly. Very few men dared tell him his ideas were too simple. He jutted out his chin, and the long cables plugged into his head like so many dreadlocks rattled against each other.

'I have considered the same approach,' continued Kilos the Unfettered, 'but abandoned this path of reasoning because of my concerns about the interface between two violently opposing temporal loci. We see the effect the temporaferrox have upon the sun here, and the earthquakes we have endured on

the planets the One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Expeditionary Fleet has wrested from them. Application of stasis technology to the naturally occurring fields of the temporaferrox could exacerbate these effects by geometrically stepped orders of magnitude.'

'It will not happen,' said Perturabo. 'I have performed the calculations myself.'

'There is a degree of risk to your calculations that is unacceptable,' said the Unfettered. 'You are a primarch, my lord, but enslaved to the flesh. I have retreated into realms of pure mathematics to test your theories. I found them… wanting.'

Perturabo's teeth ground. All his life he had suffered the same limited thinking from fools who thought themselves better than him. 'They are not *wanting*. You simply do not understand.'

'There are accounts from the Dark Age of Technology concerning the employment of temporal weaponry,' said Kilos. 'As far as it can be judged, the ancients shied from its usage.'

'I have read these accounts,' said Perturabo. 'The ancients lacked the courage to use what they knew. I am no coward.'

'They were cautious, not cowards,' said Kilos.

'You have read them, yes, I could have guessed,' said another priest. Eagerly, he pushed his way through the delegation towards Perturabo's throne, though his movement betrayed no motion of feet or other ordinary locomotion.

'And you are?' Perturabo demanded.

'Magos-Temporis Tzurin Four,' the speaker replied, metal hands opening wide as he bowed. He raised a hooded head, within which nothing could be seen but darkness.

'Of course I have read them,' said Perturabo in annoyance. 'There are many things I have read and understood that you shall never know.' His patience had been worn away by the Sak'trada Deeps campaign. He was tired of being underestimated. Never particularly tolerant of the Mechanicum, his dislike of their ways had transformed into fully fledged hostility.

‹Return to your place, or face disciplinary actions for Modus Unbecoming,› blurted the Unfettered in binharic speech.

'Let him stay where he is!' snarled Perturabo. The delegation tensed. They had all heard that the Lord of Iron understood their lightning-fast digital speech, but they could not believe it, and so it shocked them every time they were made aware of it again. 'I am weary. Do not test my patience.' He looked down at the magos. 'Your specialisation is in matters temporal?'

'Forgive me, my lord, for speaking out of turn,' said Tzurin sycophantically, 'but yes, I am an acolyte of time and its possible manipulation. Both are my area of expertise. The hrud fascinate me I believe that your plan might work.'

'What makes you so sure?' asked Perturabo. It was a simple mental exercise for him or any man of wit to switch viewpoints, and the only way to test all hypotheses correctly. The magi, with their blind obsession with dogma, were taken aback by the intensity of his question.

Magos-Temporis Tzurin Four bowed his cowled head again. If he had any eyes, they were invisible beneath his high hood. His skirts squirmed with the motion of additional restless limbs.

'Appropriate oil votives have been offered to the device you named. The machine is ancient, but functional. The portents are good. It will work.'

Perturabo looked aside in distaste and thought a moment. 'Is that all you can give me?' he muttered. He looked through the windows. Windows were a vanity. War in space was uncompromising, mathematical, the relentless plotting of trajectories for munitions that could take hours to hit their targets. Viewports, windows and the rest only weakened the structural integrity of a vessel.

One did not put windows in a castle wall.

His view was restrictive, but he could imagine the whole of the scene beyond the ship's hull as if he could see it. The 125th Expeditionary Fleet hung over the dun ball of the planet designated One Twenty-Five Twenty-Three - Gugann, as the ancients had dubbed it. The fleet appeared mighty, but the ships were emptying of men far too quickly. There were not enough recruits in the galaxy to replenish the losses he was suffering.

The Gugann star writhed with temporal disturbance. When he consulted the hololiths and flatscreen displays to view them, Perturabo could not tell if the ships were where the instruments said they were, or if they had been there, or if they would be there in a few hours. The hrud's effects on the normal run of cause and effect was impossible to model and wreaked havoc on his Legion and temper both. The Iron Warriors were the masters of logistics and abstract reasoning, but reasoning was no use when reason itself misbehaved. Coherent thought disintegrated into frustration as he stared at the sliver of the planet's crescent visible through the lancet. Lightning flickered in repeating patterns through the sulphur clouds of the world. He lost himself in their play, trying without success to discern some useful pattern from it.

'My lord primarch?' prompted Tzurin.

Perturabo's head snapped around. He blinked, focusing on the magi. Their kind

aspired to the flawless logic of machines, but they could never learn what the Lord of Iron had known instinctively since birth. They were weak like all men who needed faith. 'Everybody but my Trident and Magos Tzurin out,' he commanded. 'My lord?' said Kilos. 'We have a number of tactical simulations we should like to present to demonstrate my concerns, and other solutions to the problem of the temporal fields that might—'

'*I said out*!' Perturabo bellowed in the Lingua Technis dialect of Odense '*Tzurin*, *I will speak with you alone*.'

The delegation of priests stood around, looking at each other. They were almost certainly communicating on sub-vocal or electro-magnetic frequencies, the only way they could speak without Perturabo understanding, but their seeming indecision made them appear foolish. The primarch waited. Kilos' limbs let out a long hiss that might have been interpreted as disapproval, and he turned ponderously around and clanked out. As one, the delegation departed the command chamber without further comment, taking their charts and devices with them.

Tzurin was left alone before the throne.

'Your religion is offensive to me,' said the Lord of Iron without preamble 'You proclaim your dedication to the pursuit of knowledge while babbling about spirits. There is a contradiction inherent to everything you do that pollutes whatever understanding you might wrest from your endeavours. Let me be clear before you speak again. I do not wish to know what signs in sacred oils suggest, or how the machines feel today, for whatever they tell you is a fantasy - at best the projection of your own optimism and convictions, at worst a wilful self-delusion.'

'It is a shame you cannot be enjoined to share in the light of our creed, my lord,' said Tzurin. 'The Emperor himself welcomed us into the Imperium. The Omnissiah allows our religion when he bans all others because he sees its truth.'

Perturabo snorted. 'My father is not the messenger of your Machine God, no matter what you believe or what he allows you to think. His tolerance of your religion is expediency. You were too powerful to be subdued quickly, and your industry he desired intact,' said Perturabo dismissively. 'I am not interested in your hope, or your make-believe god, or any certitude other than that drawn from the application of fact and reason. I want you to justify why I should pursue this course of action with mathematics and logic, with no talk of the supernatural.' He leaned forwards in his chair, his blue eyes intense. 'And I want you to do it *briefly*.'

Tzurin was as inscrutable as any high ranking magos. The Mechanicum techno-magi attached to Perturabo's fleet learned quickly to tolerate his scorn.

'We of the Cult Mechanicus feel sorrow that a mind such as yours, my lord, cannot be turned to the true light of the Omnissiah, for you are percipient beyond the measure of magi. We salute your ability.'

'If you would bring a primarch into your church, why not try Ferrus, or Vulkan?' said Perturabo with a sour laugh. 'You will receive the same disdain from them. Stop your dissembling and answer my question. Concisely.'

Tzurin bowed. 'It would help if I were to fetch my hololithic demonstration. It alone describes the true effects of what you propose. With a few modifications —'

'Words! Numbers!' snapped Perturabo. 'Are they so difficult a concept, or have you built prolixity into your mess of a body?'

'Very well.' Tzurin paused, rendering his complex prepared speech into the simplest form possible. 'It will work. Your idea is sound. You are, however, if I may beg your indulgence, new to the esoteric field of temporal engineering. Your design requires some alteration to be successful.'

'You can prove this?' said Perturabo.

Tzurin reached into his robes with a metal hand and pulled out a sheaf of papers marked, to Perturabo's great relief, with nothing but numbers and algebraic symbols. 'You propose the engagement of a stasis device suddenly, in the form of a bomb, if you will. If we are to take these planets intact as instructed, that cannot be so. You will appreciate that a gradual engagement of a stasis field will minimise the risks of disruption. The biofields of the temporaferrox are far weaker than our devices. They will be overwhelmed without risk to our army, but only if it is done the way I suggest. Your concept is sound, my lord - my own work is but a humble embellishment.'

Perturabo waved the magos forward. Tzurin held out his notes to the primarch. Perturabo took them in his shovel-broad fingertips and leafed through them.

'According to this, my plan would work with small numbers of the hrud. I see from your calculations that the dislocation effects increase dramatically with the number of hrud present.' He read further. 'I have miscalculated this.' He shook his head at his own folly.

'To one hexadecimal place, that is all.'

'It is an error. You were right to bring this to my attention.'

'Your idea will work, my lord. You will need to precisely calculate the distortion effect of the hrud, or you risk trapping your Legion in a null time field

or blowing the entire planet to pieces. I have devised a machine to measure the cumulative effects of the xenos biofields. On page five, my lord, are the calculations behind its operation.'

Perturabo turned to the page. He nodded in appreciation. 'I see the field must be engaged during combat,' he said.

'Regrettably so.'

The primarch read the pages again. Tzurin's mathematics were cleanly beautiful. Only the skull-and-cog stamp of the machina opus at the bottom of every page spoiled his enjoyment of them.

He had a thought. 'Do not deceive me, magos. It will put my warriors at great risk to bring this device into the centre of the hrud.

'If you intend to capture these things at the cost of my warriors' lives, you will suffer. I will not put my men at risk for your gain.'

Perturabo suspected this was the truth. Always men said one thing and meant another. Always they had one eye on their own gain. Never take a man's first expressed intention as his genuine desire.

'A live specimen would be a fortunate bonus - not my goal, my lord,' wheedled Tzurin. 'Though knowledge gained from such a capture would be of great interest to the Emperor, I am sure. We might unlock the secrets of chronaxic weaponry, or devise locus tempora to minimise the time distortions of warp travel.'

'I am not concerned with your personal goals!' shouted Perturabo. His voice rang around the command chamber. He lowered his tone.

'I will take these worlds as the Emperor commanded, although I can see no good reason why,' he added in a rare moment of candour. A long silence ensued.

'I greatly desire specimens,' said the magos. 'I shall do as you ask, and the outcome of the mission will forever be at the forefront of my mind while I work, but I must insist that my collection of examples be allowed.'

Perturabo's features crowded in on themselves like thunderheads. Then, abruptly, he laughed. 'I should reward those who refuse to bend. Why do you desire them so? It cannot purely be for the weaponry you might develop.'

'Knowledge is my only desire, my lord!' Tzurin said passionately. 'I wish to know whence these creatures come.' He paused. His long metal fingers twined and untwined. 'My theories are considered improbable, heretical by some.'

'There can be no heresy where the truth is concerned,' said Perturabo.

'Wisely said, my lord, though not all agree.' Tzurin spoke quickly. 'What are the temporaferrox, truly? It is my supposition that they do not experience time as we

do, but live a-linearily.'

'Explain,' said Perturabo, intrigued in spite of himself.

Encouraged, Tzurin went on. 'My lord, it is my hypothesis that when the hrud migrate it is not through space that they travel, but through *time*. Consider this - previous contact with the species has always been in low numbers, until now. Perhaps they are gathering for some reason, but *now*, at this specific place in time, rather than *here*. Space may not be important for them.'

'They fight fiercely for creatures to whom space means little,' said Perturabo.

'The position in time could be the reason, rather than the territory. Most likely it is both.'

'Perhaps,' said Perturabo, unconvinced.

'Many of my brothers see them as xenos… But there is another possibility, one I would dearly like to test.'

'Which is?'

'That the hrud are not aliens at all,' said Tzurin, 'but some strain of humanity, perhaps from the far distant future, maybe the end of time itself.'

Perturabo scowled. 'That is madness. If that were so, why would they come here?'

'Who can tell?' said Tzurin. 'Who knows what horrors await in the long, dark reaches ahead? Perhaps they see peace coming in our time, and gather here to enjoy the stability that the Imperium shall bring to the galaxy.'

'Then they are fools. I see no peace,' the primarch muttered. 'Very well, Tzurin. The pursuit of knowledge is dear to my heart also. You may proceed and gather your samples. But if I believe the battle to be in any way jeopardised by your interests, I will kill you myself.'

Tzurin bowed deeply. 'It will not come to that. We will be victorious. You are a genius in conceiving this plan, my lord. Without their natural abilities, the hrud will be helpless. You shall pin them in place temporally. I imagine it will cause them great panic.'

'Perhaps,' said Perturabo. 'But you forget their technological prowess, magos. Another drawback of your creed is the arrogance it breeds in you. Their phasic plasma weaponry is far in advance of anything you and your priesthood can muster. Adequately threatened, they could produce more devastating devices.'

'I do not think that to be the case, my lord primarch.'

'You assume that if they possessed more potent devices, they would have used them already. You are complacent. Ascribing human behaviour to xenos is foolish. They are curious creatures. We cannot know what they will or will not

do. It is not in my nature to restrain myself in war, magos, but caution is required.'

'Of course, my lord.'

'Perhaps Kilos is right. Are you the only one of the high magi in the Taghmata here who believes this will work?'

'I am, my lord, I must admit. But my field is not well understood or respected by my peers. They lack my insight into these most arcane of secrets. Few can comprehend time as I do - it is the very engine of the universe.'

'You might support me out of sycophancy, hoping for reward.' Perturabo tapped the papers against his hand. What schemes flashed along the enhanced neural pathways of this creature? None of the Mechanicum could be trusted. 'However, I tire of this war. Prepare your devices. We will put my theory to the test. We shall assault the fortress. If it falls, the western landmass of One Twenty-Five Twenty-Three will be ours. The enemy are nearly spent here. If our plan works, we can finish this planet and move onto the next with greater surety of success.'

He handed the papers back to the magos.

Tzurin paused. 'What if it does not work as anticipated, my lord?' said Tzurin. 'Would not a smaller-scale trial be in order first?'

Perturabo smiled bleakly. 'You turn my own line of reasoning against me. Well then, there are times that one must take a leap in the dark. Are you not confident of your devices, magos? If it fails, we will all die.'

'Let them hurl their time altering powers against our shields, for the Motive Force is eternal and will not be undone.' Tzurin took the papers in a snaking appendage of banded metal.

'Inform me when you are prepared. I shall lead the attack myself.'

Tzurin bowed and left the chamber. Perturabo turned back to the stars.

After the magos had gone, Warsmith Forrix, first captain and Triarch of the Trident, took a hesitant step forwards. Perturabo knew his moods were becoming difficult to judge. His temper, never easy, had become unpredictable the longer they had laboured in the Deeps. Perturabo would once have been alarmed at this new wariness in his warrior's behaviour, but he took satisfaction in the control it gave him; he certainly had little over the campaign's outcome.

'Is this a wise course of action?' asked Forrix.

His fellow triarchs Harkor and Golg stepped up behind the first captain.

'You think it is not, Forrix?' the primarch asked.

'We will grind ourselves away to nothing here, in the middle of nowhere The nearest human settlement of consequence is light years away. What is the

purpose of this action? We should abandon this campaign, regroup and ask for new orders from the War Council.'

This did anger Perturabo. He stood suddenly, causing Forrix to move back. 'The command to take this benighted stretch of the void comes *directly* from Terra. It is a test. If my father wishes to see me fail, He will be disappointed. I refuse to give in to these creatures. My orders are to purge them, so purged they will be! If we do not change our strategy, then we will fail. Only fools throw their men against a wall they know will not break.'

'Then perhaps one of us might better lead this expedition?' said Harkor. There was always some hidden insinuation in his words. His was a false smile; sometimes Perturabo regretted Harkor's elevation to the Trident '*We* cannot risk your loss.'

Which one would I send? thought Perturabo.

Forrix was doggedly loyal, but even he was not above the scheming his fellow triarchs indulged in. Harkor was open in his arrogance, but he was too bold and devious, and his ambition was poisoning him. Golg was an attack dog, unsubtle and so blunt that Perturabo had not given him the rank of warsmith despite appointing him as one of his three triarchs. Perturabo was tired of them. He entertained the thought of dismissing them all.

'I will lead the assault,' the primarch said. 'Were any songs ever to be written about this war, how would it look if I lurked at the rear?' More bitterness crept into his voice; the number of songs penned about his Legion were few. 'I shall lead. Now leave me!

Perturabo, stirred briefly to enthusiasm, sank back into his throne, where he brooded upon this pointless war.

His Trident, bereft, took their leave.

SIX

TEMPORA MORTIS

999.M30
WESTERN CONTINENT, GUGANN

A peripheral chamber in the central fortress of the hrud burrow complex shook to the rumble of breaching charges, bringing its alien garrison to alertness. A second series of detonations blew in the wall in a blizzard of vitrified rock fragments. The hrud were already firing as the lead elements of the 16th Grand Battalion charged through, the 165th Company at its head.

Breaching squads came first, boltguns firing through the loops of their shields. Hrud phasic plasma materialised in the bodies of men, bypassing their armour and killing them outright. However, where the plasma impacted directly, the shields were thick enough to stop it, though they were soon peppered with holes.

The barrage felled a score of Iron Warriors, but there were too many of them and in moments the fight was over. Captain Anabaxis stepped over the bodies of his men into a room filled with the decomposition vapours of the hrud.

'Secure that door,' he ordered, pointing to the sole exit from the room. It was irregularly shaped and mysterious of purpose. 'Meos' he said, calling his Master of Signal to him.

Meos came running from the rear, the multiple antennae of his nuncio vox and

cognis signum extending from their housings as he approached.

'Captain?'

'Make contact with the rest of the Sixteenth Grand Battalion,' commanded Anabaxis. 'See if you can raise the Eleventh.'

The Iron Warriors crammed themselves into the room, taking a moment to check their weapons and replenish supplies from the artillery train at the column rear. Though it had been dug rapidly, the Imperial assault mine was perfectly square and cut into the rounded hrud chamber like a sword into flesh.

Fortreidon watched Captain Anabaxis. He was brusque as he checked fallen warriors whom the Apothecaries had not yet reached, summoning aid where needed.

'If he feels anything for the fallen men, he hides it well,' said Fortreidon.

'Iron within,' murmured Bardan. 'He deserves his name of unwavering. But do not let it make you think he does not care - he's not so careless as to kill us all. How would he win if he did?'

'Sir!' called Meos. 'I have contact with the One Hundred and Sixty-Eighth and the One Hundred and Sixty-Ninth line companies, and the Thirty-Third Grand Company. They're moving in on the hrud citadel ahead of us. The Eleventh Grand Battalion is coming in from the east. The primarch is engaging them from the north.'

'Then we hurry. Move on,' Anabaxis ordered. 'We are behind schedule. The Eleventh Grand Battalion awaits us.'

'Twenty of ours dead for eight of theirs. I hope the primarch fares better,' said Bardan as they trooped out of the chamber.

'Quiet,' said Sergeant Zhalsk. He was watching their leader carefully. 'Anabaxis will hear you. If he does not have you on the punishment racks for insubordination, I will - is that clear?'

They fought their way up winding passages under heavy fire. The hrud resistance became heavier the closer they came to the citadel at the fortress' heart. There were so many of the xenos that time became meaningless. Communications between the companies of the legion was hopelessly disrupted. Through storms of fusil fire and areas of temporal disturbance they battled, coming closer and closer to the central holdfast. The aliens, previously stealthy ambush fighters, now came at them en masse. They deployed larger weapons, and warriors in suits of scabrous living armour, and strange things that may have been machine or flesh or both. Corridors became choked with the dead.

One was filled wall to wall with the bodies of the Imperial Army penal auxilia

attached to the 11th Grand Battalion. Crumbling uniforms hung from emaciated frames, and wisps of white hair moved in the foetid breezes of the warren. Every one of them had died of old age.

Fortreidon's company were slain around him. Bardan fell, cut in half by a blade that sucked the life from him. When he hit the floor, his armour shattered into oxidised flakes and his bones into powder. Age clawed harder at Fortreidon with every engagement. The disruption of time disoriented him, putting pressures on his system that even his enhanced physiology could not compensate for.

The muffled booming of mole-mortar fire rumbled from every sinuous passageway. Earthquakes shook the planet The burrows rippled with the shocks, protected somehow from the tectonic strains placed on the planet by the hrud. Fortreidon's world became confined to an endless procession of screaming alien faces and men dying to the effects of horrific eldritch technology. He became numb, fighting on automatically. After each engagement there was barely enough time to replenish their ammunition before the next horde of xenos bore down on them and the cold ache of age pulled at his bones again. They joined with the 119th Company, who were under direct command of the 11th Grand Battalion's warsmith Hektor Dos. Together, the two forces were now barely the size of the 165th Company when it had first breached the citadel.

After what seemed like centuries of fighting, they broke through into a huge cavern supported by willowy pillars and crossed by galleries that looked to serve no purpose.

There the hrud were legion. The chamber was vast, and filled with the tumult of full-scale war. Explosions boomed everywhere as a concerted armoured assault pushed its way across the floor through a mass of flickering shapes. As Fortreidon watched, a Typhon siege tank was mobbed by the indistinct outlines of the hrud. There was a flash, and they stepped away, leaving a rusted skeleton behind. A phalanx of Dreadnoughts rushed out from behind only to be felled by searing stabs of focused temporal vortices that rotted them from the inside out. Their chassis collapsed, thinned by oxidation, and a thin, organic gruei spilled onto the ground from their sarcophagi.

A shout went up from a handful of voices at the vanguard of the company.

'The primarch! The primarch!'

More voices picked up the call. Fortreidon moved to the edge of the walkway and looked down, seeing nothing.

'Perturabo is here! To his side!' someone called.

'Forward!' ordered Warsmith Dos.

Anabaxis took up the cry, then the rest. 'Forward!'

'Iron within!' shouted Warsmith Dos.

'Iron without!' they roared in response.

Fortreidon was caught up in his brothers' advance, rushing down around a spiral walkway that took them through a multilayered battle A lifetime of horrors emerged from around every turn. His bolter was never silent, and he fired until the barrel glowed. A great tumult in the centre of the chamber suggested Perturabo's position.

Eventually they came out onto the lowest level, a buckled landscape of nonsense shapes that resonated and hummed discordantly.

And then, there he was: Perturabo, his gene-father and lord of the Iron Warriors.

The primarch pushed his way forwards, unstoppable, a cadre of his Tyranthikos veterans at his back. He was a force of nature. Nothing could arrest his progress. He stepped into the killing waves of the hrud without harm, though explosions roared around him and temporal quickening fields battered at his frame His wargear dulled, but it was so expertly made that it lost none of its functionality, and if he aged by proximity to the hrud's alien metabolisms and malign weaponry, his face did not show it. He was an avatar of fury, his blue eyes blazing hatred for all that did not wear mankind's form. The cannons strapped to his forearms spat death in every direction, shattering hrud into rotten meat. Their temporal fields failed to confound him, but sped him on when he encountered them, hastening Perturabo's movements and the hrud's deaths.

Clearing the way of aliens, the Lord of Iron looked right at Fortreidon. He raised his fist and pointed, gun barrels smoking. The young Iron Warrior's breath caught.

'Protect the device!' he bellowed. 'Iron within, iron without!'

In the primarch's wake came a vehicle of the Mechanicum. Its heavy brass treads crushed the noisome residue of the hrud and fallen Iron Warriors alike into paste. Its bulk shattered the strange shapes of the floor and broke through the support struts of walkways. Beams of crackling energy slammed into its sides, only to be repelled by the arcane sciences of its creators. Though longer than a heavy siege tank, the vehicle's body was a fragile-looking thing. The spars holding the chassis over its four track units were less than a foot thick, but it was cocooned in protective layers of energy field through which no harm could come. The mechanism was hinged in the middle, the body dividing into two parts. The engine and cogitator bank driving the vehicle occupied the smaller

section at the back. The front carried a giant flask that spewed superchilled vapour down its sides.

Fortreidon fell in alongside it as ordered, gun up, shooting when he could get a clear target. The air buckled and swam, making his aim treacherous. Phasic plasma felled the warrior next to him, but the xenos technology could not pierce the shields of the Mechanicum transport; the air beside him rippled with patterns of light.

Hrud weaponry, concealed in the very fabric of space by unclean means, opened fire The transport drew their wrath like nothing else From a thousand hrud throats came a dreadful, haunting keening, and they threw themselves heedlessly at the crawler only to be blasted apart by the growing phalanx of Iron Warriors guarding its sides.

'Iron within! Iron without!' they chanted. 'Iron within! Iron without! Iron within! Iron without!'

The battle shifted. The hrud, seeing their beams of tortured time failing to pierce the atomantic shielding of the crawler, changed tactics.

'Melee fighters, incoming!' Anabaxis' voice filled Fortreidon with savage joy. The pulse of his blood intoxicated him. This was war in its purest form, warrior to warrior in a battle of annihilation.

The cannons turned from the vehicle onto the legionaries, ripping them to shreds as parts of them were displaced in time. Warriors fell, fused with the remains of others as they were shunted thousandths of a second along their own time stream and out of synchronicity with the planet's motion.

Screeching hrud warriors appeared from folds in the air, each wielding twinned blades of light that smoked with entropic dissolution. They flickered and leapt from place to place, the munitions poured in their direction hitting naught but thin air, or wasted by the beings' native time fields before they could detonate.

The Legion was embattled on all sides.

The hrud were pouring into the cavern, the effects of their temporal weaponry ripping apart Fortreidon's perception as efficiently as it dismembered his comrades. Events broke from their normal flow. Fortreidon's war ceased to proceed from moment to moment, but was instead broken into a disorienting jumble. Many Iron Warriors died, thrown from the middle of desperate combat and then back again, their concentration broken. Weapons fell to pieces as they encountered hrud blades. Warriors speared by unearthly swords exploded, their bodies forced into impossible shapes. Others aged backwards, flushed with vigour for a second, before dying in agony as their bodies gorily rejected their

implants.

But the hrud were not invincible. They could die. Bolts slew them, as did swords, and hands locked around thin alien necks. The Iron Warriors let go of their coldly logical approach to warfare, for it was no use against such creatures. They fought like beasts and the hrud fell, yet even savagery was insufficient. The line of steel between the screaming hrud and the Mechanicum device grew thinner and thinner.

The crawler stopped. With a wheezing groan it shot anchoring harpoons deep into the ground and began a low and throaty rumbling.

Fortreidon gunned down an alien. Swords slid from its limp fingers. Where they pierced the floor, the glassy surface shattered into vitreous sand. Another creature came at him. Fortreidon fired, but his bolts failed to detonate, so he reversed his hold on his bolter and slammed the grip into the chest of the hrud. His hands burned as they came so close to the thing. His armour sang in alarm as the systems in his gauntlets and forearms decayed and failed. The hrud spun back, arms whipping over Fortreidon's head like twirled ropes. His bolter fell from his hands, components fused with corrosion.

The Mechanicum device pulsed quickly, strobing actinic light across the combatants. The Iron Warriors lit up like phantoms, frozen between each pulse. The strobing slowed, becoming slower and slower, until it was a leaden heartbeat crawl.

With a small sound, light blazed out of the device and the temperature plunged. A coruscating stasis field blanketed the battlefield.

Vortices of light whipped across the cavern where competing temporal currents clashed, tearing apart those unfortunate to be caught in the worst of it The field stabilised. The distorting effects of the hrud were banished as the stasis field overwhelmed their biology, banishing the entropic waves that surrounded them.

The hrud that Fortreidon was fighting screamed in agony and fell to the side. To his amazement, he could see it clearly.

For the first time, Fortreidon saw his enemy.

Huge black eyes blinked in a broad face thick with mucous streaming from dark pores in its flesh. Mandibles twitched in the corners of its mouth. The skin was repellently moist. It had no hair, no expression, no soul-light in its eyes. The basic form of four limbs and a head aside, it was utterly alien. Stinking robes swathed it head to foot, but on one side they had been burned away, revealing articulated armour closely fitted to its flexible limbs. It lifted its sword, but it too was affected by the field, and the sheen of light around it wavered uncontrollably

before puttering out.

Fortreidon pulled his bolt pistol from his holster and blasted the creature square in the chest. It exploded mid-screech.

Perturabo surveyed the battlefield with a look of exultant pleasure. The tactic had been his, and it was sound.

'Kill them!' commanded the Primarch. 'Kill them all!'

What had been a close-fought battle became a massacre. The hrud's weaponry malfunctioned spectacularly under the aegis of the shield, or lost the more esoteric properties that cheated the armour of the Space Marines. Their natural advantages lost, the hrud were revealed as feeble physical specimens. Horrific to look upon though they were, they had little strength, and were no match for the raw might of the Legiones Astartes.

The Iron Warriors set upon the foes with merciless rage. Perturabo led from the front, the cannons mounted on his forearm; spewing streams of solid shot into the aliens. He stamped forwards, killing any hrud found by his fists or by his guns. Their bodies fell like rain from every level of the cavern, and now they did not dissipate into mulch, but stayed whole as any mortal creature. Even in the middle of that terrible carnage, the vulture servitors of the Magos Biologis crept onto the battlefields, sealing examples of the creatures into stasis caskets and dragging them away Terrible tides pulled at Fortreidon. Every creature he slew left him more influenced by the stasis field than before, and where many died he struggled against the arrested flow of time like an insect trapped in thickening amber. There came a point when most of the enemy were dead, and the combat proceeded at glacial slowness. The Iron Warriors descended on the last survivors like nocturnal insects to lumens, now seeking the creatures out for the warping effect they had on time that counteracted the slowing of the stasis field.

Fortreidon found himself by a cavity in the wall. Black-clad, flexible bodies rolled under his feet. Green streaks of alien plasma were now a rarity. He was alone, but by the wall time flowed more or less as it should. He was still under the stasis umbrella, so the passage of events should have slowed to a crawl.

It could only mean that hrud were close.

Determined to find their hiding place, he stepped through a door, finding himself in a long corridor. He was too incensed to call for aid. The doleful battle humour of his breed was hard on him. If there were enemy here, he would kill them himself for glory and for vengeance. He needed no help.

Oval doors opened off the way, and he entered one. The interior was completely dark.

A poorly aimed shot streaked over his shoulder. He fired back, hearing the explosion of the mass-reactive bolt in its target and the collapse of a body to the floor.

He activated his light-intensification vision.

The room was full *of* the hrud, but these were no fighters. The young, the old, the infirm, he guessed.

One raised its hand on the end of a snaking arm. A gesture of surrender perhaps?

Anger swelled in Fortreidon's chest.

Kill them all, the primarch had said.

'Iron within, iron without,' he said, and opened fire.

SEVEN

NAMING DAY

809.M30

LOCHOS, OLYMPIA

There were few places in his kingdom that Dammekos did not feel entitled to be. Perturabo's study was one of them. The youth had sought a place of isolation, creating his refuge in the attic spaces of the palace's western tower. Rafters and the undersides of pantiles were his ceiling. Cold winds blew in through the ventilation lights for most of the year, and on the few hot days the attic roasted. Perturabo had never been bothered by something as feeble as mere temperature, and he worked there day and night whatever the weather.

Dammekos commanded his guards to remain at the tower's base and ascended the fifteen flights of stairs alone, emerging into his foster-son's lair.

Thin beams of sunlight admitted by gaps in the roofing sliced through dusty air. Cages hung from crossbeams, doors open, birds resting inside.

The boy had become a man, and still he hid in his attic like a bullied child. He sat at a draughtsman's board, lit by a precious lumen light, his giant frame bent over his work in what unkind eyes would have seen as a parody of concentration. Perturabo would have heard Dammekos coming as soon as he set foot on the stairs - his senses were as sharp as his mind - but he said nothing in

greeting He had heard, but he did not care.

Dammekos picked his way through the lattice of roof supports to the open space in the middle of the attic marvelling at everything he saw.

Perturabo had put in a floor of sturdy planks to cover the tower's exposed joists, and had installed shelves, a desk and a massive bed sized to his superhuman frame For such a meticulous being his study was a wonder of disorganisation. Scrolls of painstakingly inked designs were piled in untidy heaps, marred with wine rings and spatters of ink from more recent projects. Models of astounding intricacy sat on surfaces next to abandoned plates and the crocks of forgotten meals. Books on language shared space with long essays on architecture, maths, astronomy, history and more, all of them written in Perturabo's delicate handwriting. Images of fantastical machines and cityscapes littered the floor.

Dammekos came into the open centre of the study, barely daring to breathe. Still Perturabo said nothing, and Dammekos' awe turned hard.

'You are hard at work on your follies again, my son?'

Perturabo grunted. 'You know I don't like that word. Why do you taunt me with it?'

'Follies or *son*, Perturabo?' said Dammekos. There was bitter blood between them. Perturabo resented Dammekos for reasons the tyrant barely understood; Dammekos was angry that the youth rebuffed every affection he attempted to bestow upon him. Their conversation had become spiky with insinuated hurts and barely guarded criticism. As always, Dammekos regretted his jibe; Perturabo would nurse the insult for weeks. He bore grudges that could outlive mountains.

Dammekos scooped a sheet of paper from the floor. It was an armoured fighting vehicle of some kind. The image looked impressive if impractical, but Dammekos suspected Perturabo could make it work. There was variety in all Perturabo did. The breadth of his knowledge was astounding, and frightening.

'There are such treatises here,' said Dammekos, attempting an emollient tone. 'The wise men of this city should be made aware of them.'

'Why should they be interested?' said Perturabo gruffly. 'They have their ancient certainties. I would hate to upset them by presenting them with the new.' Perturabo bent closer to his scroll. His steel-nibbed pen scratched over the thick paper, never a mark wrong. The boy's massive shoulders hunched with tension as Dammekos stood behind him, as if willing the tyrant to leave, but he said nothing and continued with his draughtsmanship. Dammekos watched as a great building took shape under his quick fingers.

'Is that a theatre? It is magnificent!'

Perturabo sighed and took his pen from the paper. 'What do want, my lord?' he said with a pained expression. Dammekos hid a frown. For all his might and intellect, Perturabo behaved with the same casual disdain for his elders that all young men had.

'I mean no harm. It is time you grew out of such petulance Your naming day approaches. You will soon be of age, as I reckon it. It is a great day, a celebration of your coming to manhood. There will be feasting, and sport of all kind.' Dammekos tried to make it appealing. Every other Olympian youth looked forward to his naming day with great anticipation. Why could his foster-son not be the same? 'Have you chosen your name yet?'

'You know my name,' said Perturabo. He looked to a dusty, fragmentary codex on one of the tables. A copy of a copy of a copy of an ancient work, none before Perturabo had been able to read its ancient language. 'It is written in these records. It has meaning.'

'Then do you care to tell me what it is?'

'You wouldn't understand,' said Perturabo.

His arrogance annoyed Dammekos. 'You must choose an Olympian name. It is custom.'

'Or what, the gods will be angry? Your ceremony means nothing to me,' said Perturabo. 'My growth rate suggests to me that I was approximately six years old when you took me in. I came to true manhood before my twelve birthday. Sixteen is just a number, even more so for me than for any other boy. I have been mature for years.'

'Then act like it,' said Dammekos, his patience wearing out quickly, as it always did when he spoke with Perturabo. He had sons of his own. He could not understand why his relationship with Perturabo should upset him so much, but he returned to pick at the wound over and over. 'You are the most honoured youth in this city, and you behave poorly.'

'Do you expect gratitude? For the endless tests? For the snivelling intellectuals who come to denounce me as a fraud? For the members of your court who would see me dead?'

'These are unpleasantnesses that any highborn of Olympia must suffer. It is the price of power.'

'When will you see, my lord, that I am not like you?' Perturabo's anger was always sudden, his shout deafening. The avians in their cages cooed unhappily. Nevertheless, he held his pen away from his work so as not to spoil it. A single drop of ink fell to the floor.

'When will you see that it does not matter what you are, but how you are regarded?' said Dammekos. 'You resent me when I have done nothing but show you kindness. I love you as a son.'

'Fathers do not use their sons,' grumbled Perturabo.

Dammekos laughed. 'You'll tell me next that sons do not use their fathers. But they do, my boy, for food, for protection, for shelter, and love Aye love Don't look at me like that Day after day our family has reached out to embrace you only for you to slap our hands away. Have you no care for any but yourself?'

'I care for all men,' said Perturabo quietly. 'Why do you think I design these things? For myself? You call them follies, but they are to make the lives of people better. All through my life I have made this plain to you. You look at me and you see an asset for war, not a son. A weapon.'

'All sons must serve. This is a warlike place. The league plots against us. The oligarchs of Irex plot with them to overthrow our rule of their city. The Tyrant of Messanae works with them. Power breeds jealousy.'

'That is a lesson I have learnt all too well in your court.'

'What do you want of me?' said Dammekos, at a loss for what to say to his brooding foster-son. 'Do you want me to rage at you? You behave as if you wish me to hate you. I will not. I cannot. Can you not see that I delight in your success? I am as proud of you as I am of any of my children.'

'Your delight is at the power I bring to your arm. Your pride in me is a reflection only of your pride in yourself.' Perturabo's voice rose. His hands clenched. They were enormous, the spatulate, thick hands of a labourer magnified tenfold. 'Every venture I have undertaken, you have sought to divert towards war. *Always* towards war. My interest in language you harness to breaking the codes of your enemies. My architecture is fit only for the construction of towers and walls. My mathematics given over to the fashioning of tools of death! All while you trumpet my ability as some kind of understandable precociousness, as if I were a normal child, the prodigy of Lochos!'

He stood, looming over his adopted father. Enormous muscles bunched under his robes.

'Whatever I do, be it this!' He snatched up a model of a graceful bridge and crushed it in his fist. 'Or this!' He crumpled a plan for a public bathhouse. 'Or this, this, this, this, this!' He swept a host of rolled scrolls onto the floor. They bounced across the rugs. Fastenings broke, and some unrolled. New manners of transport, safer water systems, medical instruments - all were carried before his

rage.

Dammekos backed off. Perturabo's pupils, so dreadfully black, grew to swallow the ice of his irises.

Perturabo let out a cruel laugh, thick with self-loathing. 'Your lack of courage shames you. You have no faith in me, or you would not be afraid. I pledged you loyalty until my death. You will have nothing more from me, be content with that. I shall be your weapon as you so desire. There is nothing more to give.'

'You cannot live your life alone, my son,' said Dammekos sadly. 'One day, you will see that.'

'Why will I?' said Perturabo. 'There is no one else like me anywhere. I am alone. I am not your son. I have no need for love. There is no love in logic, only cause and effect. You require me, so you lie.'

'I do not lie. I have used you, yes,' said Dammekos, 'but that is the way of things. It does not lessen my affection.'

Perturabo's anger abated as quickly as it had come. He looked regretfully at his scattered possessions. 'You lie to everyone else. Why should I believe you? I have my own father, and one day he shall come for me.'

'How can you know?'

Perturabo gave him a look of blistering superiority, and a part of Dammekos sorrowed. Perturabo looked upwards to the roof. There was something his adopted son could see there in the sky. He never spoke of it openly. When he had been discovered, Miltiades mentioned that Perturabo had asked if he could see a 'star maelstrom'. He had never mentioned it again. A few times, Dammekos had attempted to draw the truth out of him. Perturabo was as masterly at evasion as he was at everything else.

'I just know,' said Perturabo.

'So you have faith.'

'It is not faith. I believe in nothing I cannot deduce,' Perturabo said. 'I am not a normal man. Someone put considerable effort into making me. Designing me It is illogical to suggest that they would abandon something that required so much time and expertise. Whoever created me will be looking for me.' The hulking youth turned his attention back to his drawing. He slowed, paused, then tore the sheet away. Pins popped from the woods and rattled onto the attic floor. Methodically, he ripped the design up. 'Flawed,' he muttered.

'Nobody can do such things!' said Dammekos.

'Some can,' said Perturabo. 'The Black Judges have such skill, perhaps.'

'You believe you were made by those monsters?' said Dammekos in shock.

Perturabo ignored the question. He patiently removed the scraps of paper from the board and tacked another sheet in place. Doggedly, he began again.

Dammekos watched Perturabo a while longer. Perturabo did have faith - faith in his reasoning and his sciences and his art. Men need faith when they are afraid. Perturabo was no exception. The peerless command of logic he possessed was a blind, a false wall in the fortification of his indomitable mind, for no matter what Perturabo said, he was afraid. Why else would he be so intransigent?

Perturabo was frightened of the star maelstrom.

Dammekos had a sudden misgiving. People saw Perturabo's physicality and prodigious intellect as his chief strengths. To Dammekos, this was not so. It was his foster-son's absolute pragmatism that made him such a powerful asset to his court, and the strange youth's faith in reason was the foundation of that. It did not stem from ruthlessness or from a lack of emotion, but from a sincere wish for order at any cost. That Perturabo feared something no one else could see was a crack in the stone of that absolute conviction.

It was the flaw in the bedrock that could bring low the mightiest fortress. Dammekos was a man of his time and place; self-serving, cunning sometimes needfully cruel, but he was wise, and he feared the day that his foster-son's faith would fail, as it surely must.

The Hall of Pleimodes was full to capacity with Olympians. They ate like the gods, reclining on low couches arranged according to rank, surrounded by delicacies of the highest cost. Music played while dancers wove in and out of the circles of couches, expertly trailing their long ribbons over the heads and the dishes of the feasters. The revellers clapped in delight and howled with laughter as broad strands of silk came fleetingly in the way of hands reaching for choice morsels, or mockingly caressed the more libidinous among them. Such lightness was rare in a society vested in the working of stone. The weight of fortress walls pressed in and down on everything moulding the people they surrounded subtly yet totally.

'Perturabo does not approve, father,' said Dammekos' son Herakon. He nodded at his giant foster brother. The tyrant's family were raised up on a low dais, arrayed around the most laden table of all at the centre of the room, where all could see their wealth. Only waged freemen served them, not helots, and they drank from staggeringly expensive cups of copper, gold and platinum.

'I can see Perturabo does not approve, but unlike you, my son, I am not stupid enough to say so too loudly.' Dammekos smiled and waved at Aenan Thulk, one of the twelve Logi of Lochos. He spoke to his son lightly, as if sharing a jest, but

his words, hidden just below the level of avlos flutes and stringed phromix, carried serious intent. 'There can be no division between us. Estrangement provides ingress for the assassin's knife. You are the eldest, Herakon, but you lack the guile for tyranthood. Guard your tongue better.'

Herakon attempted to return his father's smile in order to maintain the pretence, but he cringed like a cur stung by a moor asp. Dammekos exchanged pleasantries with Mondak Eumenos, the third Logi. He was of Irex, regarded as an outsider and rude in manner by his fellows, and for good reason. Dammekos had put him close to his own position as a reminder to the other eleven Logi that their status depended very much on his will. Such things were beyond Herakon. Andos was better, but too kindly for kingship. Of his three natural-born children, only his daughter Calliphone had the nous for leadership. That was a shame - there were female tyrants on Olympia, but not in Lochos. Never there.

Herakon was right about Perturabo. Dammekos watched him from the corner of his eye over the heaped food between them. Other boys made merry at their Naming Ceremony. They were forgiven bawdy behaviour. Indeed, it was expected, the occasion being a dividing line between the first and second stages of life, where the appetites of a man might be expressed through the follies of youth. Displays of poetic extemporisation, drunkenness, lechery, feats of strength and more were encouraged.

Perturabo did none of that.

He lay on his specially made feasting couch, scowling at the frivolity. He wore the expression of an accountant forced to attend the grand celebrations of his bankrupt king. He would be totting up the cost of every fruit and each joint of meat. He had stopped telling Dammekos how many of the poor their feasts would feed, but he had not stopped thinking about it. The tyrant had hoped he would throw off his sullen nature just for one day, but he had known it for a vain hope.

Time to get this over with, thought Dammekos.

Perturabo was never going to fit the image of an Olympian man, and Dammekos was beginning to see there was no point trying to make him. Nevertheless, he dreaded the little speech he would have to make now more than many others he had delivered.

The Tyrant of Lochos stood. The music came to a flourished halt and a fanfare of iron carynxes blared hard notes from mouths cast as angry divine faces.

'Today is my foster-son's name day!' said Dammekos.

There was a broad cheer from the assembled nobility. Though not well liked,

Perturabo was well respected, and wine and fear can both make a man shout more loudly.

'He has dwelt among us here at Lochos now for ten years, and although his birth date remains as mysterious to us as so much about him, we reckon it is now his sixteenth birthday, on this, the anniversary of his coming to us. He is evidently a man, after all!' There was another cheer. No one could doubt that was the truth. Perturabo was a giant, taller and more heavily built than any man in Olympian history, with the face and beard of a thirty-year-old general. 'Now he has come of age, our gift from the gods. It is time for him to choose the name he will be known as forevermore.'

Perturabo had been staring unblinkingly at him all the way through this speech. Dammekos turned and looked straight into that cold stare of his, mustering what semblance of warmth he could in the iciness of Perturabo's regard.

'Foster-son. Before you choose, there is another tiding I must bring to your attention. I have decided that you shall be adopted into my family formally. This is a sign not only of your great promise as a man…' Dammekos wetted his lips. His voice became strong, edged with iron. He would make this stubborn boy see. 'But also of the great love we hold for you in our hearts! My son, I salute you!'

Dammekos raised his goblet and drank. The nobles followed suit with scattered cries of support. Perturabo raised his goblet a fraction, his eyes never once leaving Dammekos' own, and took a small sip. Calliphone smiled affectionately at her new brother, and touched his arm. Herakon scowled. Andos dapped politely.

'Now stand!' said Dammekos. 'It is time for you to choose your name!'

The crowd began a chant.

'Name! Name! Name! Name! Name!'

They banged their drinking vessels of priceless conductive metals on the dining tables and stamped their sandals upon the marble floor. Through the thunders of their approbation, five priestesses wafted their way through the crowd. They were covered from head to foot in sheer black silks that billowed and clung to their nakedness beneath. Gold masks of Hephone, homed goddess of life, covered their faces. The only part of them that was visible was their eyes. Their leader carried a silver knife and a golden bowl.

They stood before Perturabo, whose head, even while he reclined upon his massive couch, came to their shoulders.

'Stand!' commanded the priestess. Silence fell across the hall.

Very deliberately, Perturabo put his goblet aside and rose to his full, imposing

height. The priestesses, agents of the divine though they were, appeared as children before him.

Two priestesses lifted Perturabo's hand over the lead priestess' golden bowl. She pressed the knife to his palm and looked up into his thickset face.

'You come of age. Choose your name, and by blood it will be sealed.'

Perturabo stared at her.

'What name will you choose, my son,' prompted Dammekos, 'to be remembered in the hallowed annals of our family?'

Perturabo looked across the hall. 'A thing has a nature unto itself. That nature is immutable. It might be changed temporarily by heat, or alloyed with another element to create a third. It might be wrought and changed in form by the application of force or of chemicals. Stone can be cut and made into walls. Silver and gold might be smelted and combined into electrum. Iron can be forged into weapons or ploughs. Water might be heated to steam.

'But the stone remains stone. The silver and gold can be separated by acid. Iron can be remade, or might rust into powder, where it nevertheless remains iron. Steam condenses back into water. Nothing changes it nature. You expect me to take a name to honour one of your ancient heroes. Eidrachos, perhaps, or Rakator. I cannot assume these names or any other, for I am not them. I am Perturabo. I was made to be Perturabo. As I boy I was Perturabo, and as a man I shall remain him. My name is me, and I am my name.'

He looked down at the woman. The knife was shaking in her hand.

'Cut me,' he commanded her, 'and release Perturabo's blood, for my name is Perturabo.'

Herakon was smiling unpleasantly. Dammekos saw Calliphone mouth 'Oh, Perturabo' at him.

Unsure, the priestess looked to Dammekos for guidance. Perturabo was no Olympian name. A tense quiet fell across the hall.

The tyrant concealed his disappointment behind a light smile. 'He is within his rights to choose his own name. My son is not like the rest of us. If he is Perturabo, then he is Perturabo. To my son, Perturabo!' he exclaimed.

The response was muted. 'Perturabo!' the nobles said back.

The priestess made a swift slash across Perturabo's hand. Blood welled from the wound, which then quickly closed. A single spotted fell into the cup.

'Then I name you Perturabo,' the priestess said.

She and her acolytes withdrew.

Perturabo glowered still, but Dammekos thought he saw, in the instant before

the giant sat, the slightest smile upon his lips. A flash of a thing, gone before it arrived, like a fish rising in the water.

EIGHT

IRON AT BAY

999.M30

GHOLGHIS, THE VULPA STRAITS, SAK'TRADA DEEPS

Dantioch was drowsing in the catalepsian sleep when the alarms sounded. Both hemispheres of his brain jolted into full wakefulness, but he suffered a brief dissociative moment as their operations meshed before he could respond properly. His reactions were slowing.

'Gatekeeper, report.'

The vox crackled like it was five hundred years old, blurring the words of the gatekeeper. '*Warsmith*, *you must come to the operations centre immediately*. *The enemy is back*, *and in numbers I cannot calculate*.'

'Vastopol, are you on duty?' asked Dantioch. Vastopol was the 14th Grand Company's warrior-poet, and as such excused watch duty.

'*Ardendus is afflicted my lord*,' responded Vastopol. '*His gifts are failing*, *according to Apothecary Malzor*. *I offered to take his watch*.'

'I'm on my way.'

A garrison under siege slept in its armour; Dantioch had minimal preparations to make He snatched up his helm and bolter from his arming stands, slammed the door release and ran out into the corridor.

So Ardendus' implants were failing. He wasn't the first. One after another, their Emperor-given organs had started to malfunction. He had warriors whose sight was blurred, others whose joints locked or muscles weakened, and those who could not keep their rations down. Night after night, the hrud poured through the system in ever greater numbers. Since the primarch's victory on Gugann, the trickle had become a flood. Every passage left his men weaker. Soon, he was sure, they would begin to die of old age as the mortals had.

Mortals, he thought. They were all mortal now.

Alarms blared throughout the fortress. The tramp of armoured feet hurrying to battlestations echoed along every corridor. The air thrummed with the sound of heavy machinery powering up the weapons batteries and void shielding. His ears, attuned to the moods of mechanisms, picked out irregular rhythms in the workings of the titanic engines. The machines suffered as much as his men.

The left leg of his own armour clicked with every third step, a slow wearing of components he would not be able to replace. The Iron Warriors were experts in supply and the fortress housed massive stores of parts, but these too were affected by the ageing effects of the hrud and had decayed at the same rate as those in use. Two days ago he had opened a brittle case of replacement fibre-bundles, the data-stamp *signifying* the manufacturing date to be no more than four months past, only to find the items within useless.

'*We have indications of a major temporal vortex occurring in the southern sky*, *warsmith*,' voxed Vastopol. '*Multiple minor incursions on fifteen levels*.'

Dantioch's helm chimed as Vastopol inloaded the data.

'I will go to the eastern wall-walk so I may observe the celestial phenomenon myself. Stand by for my orders.'

'*Be on guard*, *warsmith*. *We are registering multiple contacts along that route*.'

Dantioch hailed his warships in orbit - fourteen of all classes. The ships were built to last and weathered the nightly wash of entropic energies well. Their crews were another matter. Though the hrud ships could not contend with the Imperial vessels, each close-range encounter left corridors littered with geriatric crewmen. Like the garrison, the fleet's strength was being bled from it second by accelerated second.

'Another night begins, brother-captains,' Dantioch voxed. 'Engage at distance. Do not approach within the foe's temporal umbrella. We have lost too many men already.'

Without waiting for a reply, Dantioch closed off the line and brought up an overlay of the fortress on his helm visor, searching for nearby squads. 'Sergeant

Zolan. You are close to my position, loin me.'

'As *you command*, *warsmith*,' voxed Zolan.

Dantioch quickly went over his grand company's disposition. He had worryingly few legionaries left: just over three hundred remained on the planet out of the five hundred he had brought with him. There had been over two thousand penal auxilia troopers embedded in his force, but the majority of them had perished in their first encounter with the hrud, ageing to living skeletons in seconds, then crumbling to dust before his eyes.

He had dispatched the rest of the fleet to Krak Fiorina on the far side of the straits under Captain Chalx's command. He could only assume he was now dead, along with Warsmith Kalkoon at Stratopolae. Both had reported hrud incursions within days of the migration beginning. Astropathic communications had fallen silent soon after.

Dantioch gave orders as he ran, commanding that the guns be ready, ordering repair teams to the southern wall, rousing his men to war so that all of them were prepared for what was to come. He came to a T-junction in the corridor. Cut six weeks ago, it had been perfectly angled, clean grey stone. Now it was pockmarked and crumbling.

Wherever the hrud had been, they left their marks.

In the beginning the hrud were so few that Dantioch had been able to use the damage they left to calculate the extent of their entropy fields' influence at one point five metres. He understood now that these had been wayfinders, some kind of scout.

Perhaps their migration fleets used the Gholghis System for the same reason that Perturabo had commanded the warsmith to take it - the straits it guarded were a corridor through the unstable stars of the Sak'trada Deeps. These small suns burned with cold volatility, pumping out unexpected bursts of high-energy particles.

But why the hrud appeared in so many numbers in his fortress, why they came off their ships at all, why they flooded through the short run of the watercourse - all of that was inexplicable. No one knew how the hrud travelled, or why their presence had such a catastrophic impact on space-time. It could be the hrud were deliberately targeting the fortress as they fled, in retaliation for the warrens cleansed during compliance. It could be the Iron Warriors were merely in the way of their unguessable migration routes. Both theories might be correct, or both wrong. There was no way to tell. The hrud were as mysterious as they were troublesome.

Zolan's squad fell in beside him, six Space Marines where once there had been twenty.

'Be ready,' said Dantioch. 'There is a major incursion building.'

'Yes, warsmith,' said Zolan. His anger of a few days before was gone, replaced by the steely vigilance of an Iron Warrior facing enemies at the walls.

They came to the Portis Majora leading onto the eastern battlements, where the fortress extruded itself from the mountain into Gholghis' hard landscapes. A smaller let-way was set into the gate Dantioch was reaching for the press panel when he saw rust spreading across the metal. A terrible cold burned his hand through his gauntlet, and he snatched it away.

'Back!' he shouted.

Space-time quirked. He had been told by Techmarine Tavarre that the effects of the hrud on the surrounding environment bore some resemblance to those recorded at the very edge of a singularity event horizon. Dantioch had not yet been close enough to either a hrud or a star vortex to test that hypothesis.

Half a dozen boltguns rose together. Dantioch kicked at the door release, his own bolter up. His foot passed through the temporal field bleeding through the door, and his flesh tingled.

The door juddered open unhealthily. A single hrud blocked the way. It was taller than a mortal, though not so tall as a legionary. Its shape was obscured by the oily swirl of time bent out of true. Through gaps in its distortion field, Dantioch glimpsed the filthy robes the being wore, along with the hint of a weapon in its clawed hands and a face set with bulging eyes occupied by pupils so large the entire surface was black.

His men fired the instant the door was cleared. The hrud smacked its free hand into something attached to its side and time slowed to a crawl. Dantioch could see each individual bolt moving through the air, slower than projectiles fired into the ballistics gels used in the weapons ranges in the forge. Many misfired, the propellant charge in their rears sputtering out. Of the handful that penetrated the thing's protective field, none hit their target. They vanished in flashes of displaced reality as the very fabric of the universe twisted around them.

The hrud's weapon discharged with a hiss. A bolt of flickering plasma took one of Zolan's men in the chest. He burned inside his armour, flailing as his flesh was consumed. His helm lenses shattered, releasing black smoke and twin streams of bubbling liquid that rolled down his cheeks.

Dantioch dropped his bolter and snatched out his power sword. The hrud lunged for him. The touch of it was death itself, and he felt the life run from his

body as it was drained of vitality. He convulsed with pain and stumbled backwards.

There was a cry from behind.

'Protect the warsmith!'

Two Iron Warriors threw themselves at the thing. It screamed hideously, and Dantioch reeled back. His power armour was scorchingly hot.

The legionaries cut down the hrud quickly. Its entropic field blinked out, affording them a glimpse of its bizarre alien physiology - the flexible arms and legs, the long neck, a baby-like face with superfluous mandibles - before it dissolved into a stinking puddle of matter.

One of the Space Marines who had saved Dantioch staggered back into the line The other lay dead on the floor. His helm was corroded through, and the face beneath was as desiccated and wasted as an ancient mummy's.

Dantioch's armour pinged and creaked as it cooled. There was a patina on the bare ceramite of his arm. When he clenched his fist, his bones ground against each other and his muscles ached.

He motioned his men on, and they passed into Gholghis' freezing night.

The world's hydrological system was minimal, so the sky was clear. No moon orbited Gholghis to soften its darkness; the stars alone provided illumination. However, this night they were drowned out by a bright wheel of actinic light turning in the sky. Oppressive energy poured from it, sapping the strength from the legionaries. A headache gripped Dantioch's skull, but he forced himself to observe, to see what he might report to his primarch, no matter the cost to himself.

Dark patches moved over the vortex's fluid surface: the ships of the hrud, a fleet of them, enough to waste a star system by their presence alone.

'To the battlements,' he said painfully. 'Move!'

Gholghis shuddered to a tremor. Earthquakes and stellar outbursts always accompanied the xenos' major incursions. The cliff above the fortress wall-walk was a dizzying pattern of black crevices and dark-grey ridges. It curved round to meet the wall, where a door was set into the rock. Above it rose the solid, blocky silhouette of the watchtower bastion.

The Iron Warriors staggered on under the deadly shine of the phenomenon. Their suits pitted. Their limbs weakened. They reached the parapet ten metres away from the door a hundred years older than when they had left the fortress.

'It has never been this bad,' gasped Zolan. 'There must be millions of them up there.'

'The plain! Look onto the plain!' shouted one of the legionaries, and there was a note of panic in his voice.

Out on the dusty wastes, there was a painful shimmer of the same quality as the vortex in the sky, a silvery curtain of light that had the look of a pict whose colours had been reversed to negative. Through the curtain's undulations came a horde of hrud, so many that they appeared to be more a liquid that poured itself over the plain rather than a body of individuals. Their entropic shroud tortured the atmosphere into a frantic dance. At its edge, carbon snows fell as gas condensed out of the sky; towards the middle, the air shimmered with heat.

The hrud moved as silently as an army of ghosts, advancing on the void shields of the fortress. The guns housed in the wall's embrasures activated, barrels acquiring targets and preparing to fire. The thrumming of powerful generators made the stones rumble.

'A band of hrud advanced before the horde and came to the void shield, its barely perceptible shimmer flaring brightly as the aliens encountered it, bringing more light to the surface of Gholghis than it had experienced for millennia. A crackling boom preceded the shield's collapse as it burned itself out. The mountain shook. The generators are overloaded. How is that possible?' said Zolan. 'Who knows what is possible here? How does one displace time into the warp?' said Dantioch. His throat ached. 'They use the life of the universe as a weapon. Void shields will not stop such a thing - only will and iron.'

A thin black line of dead hrud, like scum from a filthy tide, marked the position of the downed shield. The aliens held for a moment, then came on again in a single mass. Converging in an arrowhead on a single point, they trampled the mush of their comrade's bodies.

'That's it,' said Dantioch. 'They've passed the inner range marker.'

'Right into the killing field,' said Zolan. 'We may die, but so shall they.'

The fortress' guns gave voice. Blasts of fire shot from the walls, driving back the dark light of the hrud. Munitions fell among the creatures, but most did not explode. Instead, their explosives decayed or their metal failed. Some went off with weak bangs, or shattered into flakes of oxidisation midflight. Where they did detonate, hundreds of the hrud died, but the xenos were so numerous that they swallowed up the bombardment like the ocean swallows stones.

Dantioch put out a general order to his men that they come out to repel an escalade, and the Iron Warriors crowded onto the wall, weapons ready. Support teams set up their heavy armament and unleashed their long-range weapons into the creatures.

'Ready!' commanded Dantioch. His breath was coming hard, and the irritation in his throat was becoming unbearable. He coughed a little, but far from alleviating the sensation, it worsened it.

The sound of three hundred boltguns racking simultaneously was loud enough to penetrate the thunder of the bombardment.

'Pick your targets!' he shouted.

The main body of the hrud did not come for the walls. They sank out of sight into the ground some four hundred metres short of the fortress.

'They are going into the watercourse,' said Dantioch. 'Stay alert. Watch for the soldier-caste.' He scanned the silent black mass. They made no direct attack, but drained away into the ground to follow the channel in the rock. He leaned out over the wall and looked down. The stone was crumbling over the course of the subterranean river. It would be worse on the south wall.

'Why aren't they attacking?' said Zoltan hoarsely. 'We cannot prevail, but I would put the metal to them.'

'They do not need to attack,' said Dantioch.

A garbled vox message screeched in his ear. He could make no sense of it but the source was clear. He looked to the sky.

'They are moving into attack vectors in orbit,' he said. 'It will not be long before they move on us down here.'

The tide of hrud ships were crawling apart from one another, their uncertain shapes tilting. Then lightning stabbed across the sky. Purple aurorae coursed over the planet's atmosphere as the fortress' upper void shields absorbed the energies of exotic weaponry.

Light stabbed out from the crowd of hrud, targeting the weapons batteries.

'Heavy teams, concentrate on the discharge points!' shouted Dantioch. The effort made him cough.

More hrud advanced from the shimmering curtain, and these were all of the soldier-caste. Strange lights surrounded them, and odd, flexible-limbed walkers staggered in the midst of their throng. Half of these bore strange, bulbous cannons, and they advanced to range and set themselves squarely into the ground, opening fire not many metres from the edge of the light curtain. Glimmering energy loops caressed the wall, shearing off the barrels of guns and toppling buttressing in showers of crumbling stone.

'They have all this back to front. Why send their non-combatants forward before their warriors?' said Zolan.

'The entropic field. So many of them together will kill us more surely than a

gun,' said Dantioch. Every passing second weighed on him more heavily than a decade.

Vox bursts took all his attention.

'*Warsmith*! *There are hrud in the fortress*!' said the first.

A dozen more followed, all shouted over the sounds of frantic combat.

'*This is Squad Forty*. *They're pushing on the gate*.'

Before Dantioch could request further details from the sergeant, his ident-rune blinked out, replaced with the doleful red of a mortis signifier.

'The gates!' Dantioch said, and pointed back the way they had come onto the wall.

The gates blew outwards, carrying the small figures of legionaries on its shock front. Their bodies moved unnaturally through the air, and the blades of shattered metal that chased them fell to the ground in slow motion. Hrud warriors oozed out onto the eastern wall before the dead of Squad Forty had a chance to hit the ground. Their presence was discernible only obliquely; they slithered into a firing line like black sheets dragged through midnight waters, but though they appeared ethereal, the hrud's weapons were not. Green blazes skipped through reality, punching Iron Warriors from their feet in showers of melted ceramite and adamantium. The legionaries were sluggish to respond, slowed by age.

'*Fire*!' ordered Dantioch.

His voice was croak. All around him the fortress was falling into disrepair, as surely as if it had been left abandoned for long millennia. Erosive runnels marked the surface of smooth ashlar. Metal corroded and failed. The beating mechanical heart of the fortress faltered, and alarms rang from every quarter. The hrud were pressing in from the gate, while others were attempting lesser doorways onto the walls.

'*There are hrud on every level*,' Vastopol voxed him urgently.

'Give me numbers!' shouted Dantioch over the whooping howls of hrud temporal weaponry and the return thunder of bolt guns.

'*Warsmith… I can provide no clear estimate*. *There are too many of them*. *Auguries are going dark across the engagement zone*.'

Dantioch cursed. The Iron Warriors were being pushed back into a knot on the wall. Lesser doors in the cliff face behind the wall-walk were opening. No more Space Marines emerged, but more hrud came out. The Iron Warrior's heavy guns were falling silent. His warriors faltered, their lives worn away by the pernicious temporal effects of the hrud. By the time the aliens were close enough to attack with their envenomed claws, eschewing their guns, the legionaries in the front

line could barely stand. Casualty figures ticked upwards relentlessly.

The planet shook with another powerful tremor, causing Gholghis to roar in pain and send sheets of rock tumbling from its peaks.

'We can't win,' said Dantioch suddenly.

The Iron Warriors lowered their weapons.

'To the watchtower,' said Dantioch. 'There is little we can do here.' They ran swiftly along the wall-walk, their footfalls pounding against the stone in time with the beat of the guns, an explosive metronome that paced out the measure of their lives heartbeat for heartbeat. But the entropic fields of the hrud made a mockery of time's progression, and they aged as they ran, their fortress bathed in deadly temporal radiation. The door to the watchtower was set directly into the stone at the end of the wall-walk, centuries away. Dantioch's breath wheezed in his helm as he ran.

The tremors grew to a fully-fledged earthquake, bringing down the wall behind them. The soldier-caste hrud on the plain had advanced beyond the point where the migrating aliens sank from sight into the ground, intensifying the wild temporal effects bedevilling the defenders. Space Marines fell as they ran, their rusted armour falling to pieces and shattering enfeebled bones. Those Iron Warriors that could fought in a desperate rearguard action, their efforts hampered as time began to skip. Moments from the future impinged on the present.

Dantioch was no longer running, but stood indecisively.

'We can't win here,' he said suddenly.

Then he was running again, and the door was close at hand…

He reached for it, but found himself rolling from bed as alarms stirred him from slumber.

'*Gatekeeper*, *report*.'

He shook the past away. He focused on the present: the door to the watchtower. The tides of time tugged on him like those of a surging ocean, pulling him out to drown in deep water. This was no illusion, but a genuine effect. Iron Warriors around him flickered from being, shrouded by the same squirming of tormented time and space.

Dozens of them were dying. Dantioch slammed into the door. The mechanisms to open it were blinking erratically. The metal was holed with corrosion. He kicked at the door, denting it. He raised his leg to kick again, but the strength was not in him, and his foot skidded off the metal.

The battlements rang to the horrific shrieks of the hrud, virtually indistinguishable from that of their weaponry.

'Melta!' he panted. He reached out a hand. He was exhausted. The cries of the hrud were getting closer.

Someone pushed a fusion charge into his hand. He slapped it on the door and stepped back. When it went off, the sense of *displacement in time* intensified. For a moment, he had no idea where he was, flitting up and down his own timeline…

Cold wind stroked his face, making him start. A deep valley plunged away at his feet, the mountain on the far side of its shadowed gorge hazed by distance. His hands were boy's hands. He wore a rough shirt and no shoes. Something bleated below him. Marooned on a ledge was a young caprid. He shook away the confusion caused by the visions of war and monsters and began to nimbly climb down to rescue the animal. He must hurry, or his father would be angry with him.

'Dantioch!' a voice said. 'Warsmith!'

The scene dissolved. Vastopol was in front of him. 'I was on Olympia…' said Dantioch. He looked at Vastopol's face. 'You have become old.'

'We all have. What are we to do? What are your orders?'

Somehow, he was in the watchtower, the tall bastion and control hub of the fortress. Machine consoles burned. Techmarine Tavarre worked with the methodical nature of a man in his laboratory, repairing what he could. The thick plasteel door had become a holed piece of scrap. Iron Warriors took its place, barring the doorway, ducking in and out of cover and loosing shots down the stairs at the things creeping up them. A wave front of killing cold preceded the hrud, alternating with unbearable heat. The stone screeched as it shifted within their deadly entropic fields.

'They're targeting the warsmith,' snarled Zolan, 'making him sick with age.'

'Brother!' said Vastopol. The warrior-poet's face was gnarled with wrinkles he had not had earlier that day.

'They're coming again!' shouted Zolan.

Dantioch shook off his fugue. With a thought he tripped the emergency extraction beacon in his armour. It signalled the Iron *Ward*, his flagship cruiser in orbit above Gholghis. Within seconds, Stormbird gunships would be scrambling to collect them.

'We leave this fortress,' said Dantioch. 'Seal the door with stone We will not be returning.'

Zolan nodded and brought forward a demolition team. They slammed charges onto the stone that anchored themselves into place with self-tapping bolts. Their

battle-brothers died providing covering fire.

'Back! Back!' Zolan shouted. Screeching xenos warriors reached into the room with long, flexible arms and yanked a Space Marine from his feet. Zolan grabbed his hand and pulled back, but to no avail. Against a healthy Iron Warrior, even a crowd of hrud would stand no chance, but their entropic fields had enfeebled him and he was dragged to his death.

'Detonate,' ordered Dantioch.

Stone blasted into the room, banging off their armour in fist-sized chunks. Gravel pattered down, swirling veils of pulverised rock drifting over the mound of rubble blocking the entrance to the control chamber.

'All this, destroy it too. Leave nothing for them,' said Dantioch, gesturing at the systems yet surviving. He watched his weary men limping from place to place, laying charges. There were nine of them left in the control chamber.

Dantioch opened a vox-link. 'This is your warsmith. Warriors of the Fourteenth Grand Company, heed me. Iron that will not bend will shatter. We withdraw. All who can, make your way to the landing pad. Iron within!'

'*Iron without*.' There were pitifully few voices to give the response.

The Iron Warriors withdrew in a cloud of rock dust and fire.

The Stormbird's engines screamed as it leapt skywards. Dantioch watched the planet fall behind them on its internal screens. The hrud continued to pour over the plains, disappearing into the ground as they flowed on towards their mysterious destination. Warriors swarmed the battlements, and their guns continued to pound the fortress. The scattered dead of the Iron Warriors lay on the rockcrete of the landing pad; several of them had died as they had run for escape, their bodies giving out. Stormbirds rose from other parts of the fortress, bearing away the few survivors. From the control room, only a few had made it to the landing pad. No others had heeded his call to join him there Four in total had escaped.

Tavarre lay wheezing against a bulkhead, barely able to move. Vastopol was in little better shape.

Sergeant Zolan was the worst, however. He had fought to the end, stumbling only as he entered the belly of the Stormbird. He had fallen on the landing ramp as it closed, and had not moved since. Dantioch had wrestled his helm from Zolan's head, and now he sat at his side, holding his hand. Away from the hrud, his mind cleared a little, and more than the terrible weight of age, it was shame that made Dantioch bow his head.

He had failed.

'Prepare the warp engines for emergency jump,' he voxed the ships in a croaking voice. 'We withdraw.'

Zolan gripped his hand a little tighter. Rheumy eyes opened in a face so aged that it no longer looked human.

'You did what you could. Not even Lord Perturabo could have held that fortress,' said Zolan.

'You were right, my friend. We should have left days ago.'

'No one can blame you, Dantioch,' whispered Zolan, his head sagging to one side. His words were slurred, as if with sleep. 'Retreat is not in our nature.'

'Dogma is no substitute for wisdom.'

'Try telling that to our primarch,' said Zolan. His withered lips managed a smile. His eyes slid closed.

Dantioch bent over the sergeant's ear and whispered into it. 'From iron cometh strength. From strength cometh will. From will cometh faith. From faith cometh honour. From honour cometh iron. This is the Unbreakable Litany.'

'And may it forever be so,' breathed Zolan. It was his last breath. Four personnel runes remained lit in Dantioch's helmplate. Zolan's flickered, and went dark to the chime of the mortis sign. The noise of atmospheric passage ceased as the Stormbird broke the hold of Gholghis' weak gravity. The silence of space Dantioch brief respite from a war that could not be won. Now he must face Perturabo.

NINE

ASSASSINATION

824.M30
LOCHOS, OLYMPIA

'They are marvellous, brother,' said Calliphone.

The balcony of Calliphone's apartments jutted far out from the side of the palace of Lochos on layered corbels of stone, overlooking the Platea Stratiotis. On the neatly sectioned decorative paving of the parade ground below, the army of Perturabo gathered. Amid the squares of soldiers awaiting inspection by Dammekos, three dozen war machines of Perturabo's own design idled their engines. Their insignia were freshly painted on newly minted armoured hulls. Broad linked tracks vibrated with the energy of powerful engines.

'They are nothing,' Perturabo said without false modesty. He knew he could do better. 'I did what I could with what we have available here.'

'They are better than the steam landships the other cities have,' said Calliphone.

'Thank you,' he said, genuinely pleased. His foster sister's opinion was one of the few he cared about. 'They will bring us victory. Victory will bring more resources, more resources will mean better machines and that will lead to—'

'More victory,' she said, resting her hand on his arm. Her head was level with his elbow, and she had to reach up to touch him. 'You've proven your worth in

battle more than once, brother. It is about time father allowed you to apply that formidable mind of yours to strategy. But, and I ask you gently because I do not want to offend you, is this war wise?'

Only Calliphone could question him so openly without annoying him, though her need to cosset his temper did irritate. 'Kardis will attack us. Their recent ostentatious protestations of alliance make me all the more suspicious that it will be sooner rather than later.'

'They may have been sincere,' she said.

Below, optios and decurions yelled out as Dammekos walked down a thickly carpeted stair into the square. The thunder of polished boots echoed from the walls of the palace, startling birds into flight.

She pulled back from the balustrade and walked to the couch set at its rear. Food and drink was set out for them there under an awning of coloured silk. She dipped a taster into the wine - another device made by her foster brother - and consulted the dial. Satisfied it was untainted, she removed the device and ladled a measure into her goblet. 'It is a dangerous course of action. If we attack them…' She shrugged.

'When we attack them, Calliphone,' said Perturabo. 'You will not convince me otherwise. Dammekos is eager.'

'When, then. Tomorrow you will plunge all of Pellekontia into war. It will spread from here. No one will trust us. We will have no alliances.'

'It is only dangerous if we lose,' he countered. 'And we will not lose. Kardis has access to the only substantial supply of copper on this continent. If we can take it, it will enable me to build far more potent machines than those armoured vehicles in the square. Imagine if every one of our warriors were equipped with a lightning gun instead of a rifle? Armour would be useless. The walls of many cities would become obsolete overnight.'

'From Kardis, then where?' asked Calliphone.

Perturabo stared down at his troops as his lord went among them, examining their uniforms and weaponry. They were technically Dammekos' troops, but the proprietorial way he walked between their lines rankled the future primarch.

'There are other elements that can be made into even mightier weapons,' he said after a pause. Perturabo measured his words carefully, unsure of how much to reveal. 'Elements with a certain quality of fissility. Rare elements. The ancients stripped this planet of most of its resources. They were disproportionately interested in fissile elements. If I can acquire enough, I will build a weapon of such awful potency that it will end war on Olympia forever.'

'Really?' she said archly. 'You are so clever.'

As with so much human interaction, Perturabo was impervious to humour when he was thinking deeply, unless he felt overly mocked and his temper came into play. When he used humour, it was rarely spontaneous, but deployed like a weapon in a planned attack.

He continued, deadly serious. 'In the Hidden Library I learned much that you would be wise to read.'

'You're so pleased with digging up that old ruin,' she said. 'Seven years ago now. It's time you found yourself a new achievement to crow about.'

'You dismiss it too lightly.' Still he watched Dammekos. 'You should read the books I found there.'

'Who says I haven't?' she said coyly. Perturabo finally turned to face her. She plucked a grape from a bunch with her lips. 'The information you recovered from the city has revolutionised life here Anyone with half a mind should read it, and I have.'

He smiled at that, pleased. 'Dammekos does not approve of wise women.' He never called the tyrant father.

Calliphone made a little face of unconcern. 'You are not the only secretive one in our family, though you do it so well.'

Perturabo was thoughtful. 'It is true that court life breeds a certain reticence. You would have thought my nature would have been a natural fit for circumstances here, but instead it sets me even further apart from you.'

Calliphone threw a grape at her foster brother's head. 'If anything, 'Bo, your problem is that you exemplify the worst of our Olympian virtues! Introspective, secretive, paranoid and superior.'

It was all true, though she meant it without malice. 'Bo was another thing he allowed her. No other would dare to shorten his name.

He smiled at her guardedly. Of all his relatives at court, she was the only one he had anything approaching a friendship with. But he did not trust her, and so true affection remained tantalisingly out of reach. Theirs was a common bond formed by adversity. Both were secretly rueful it was so, for both craved real companionship. However, neither could do anything about it, and so like all in Lochos, they played the parts expected of them in the great tragedy of life.

'Will it work?' she said. She poured a second cup of wine for him, making a show she didn't care. Her cup would be thimble-sized in his enormous hands, so she filled one for him large enough to be used as a bucket.

'Yes, of course it will. I have a strategy. It cannot fail. Dammekos thinks I will

do all this for Lochos, but I am not doing it for this city. I go to war for Olympia. There are other worlds than this one, Calliphone, and we are vulnerable while we are divided. What if the Black Judges return, or others? We must be ready.'

'The Black Judges are a legend,' she said. 'The dark brothers of the gods. They watch over us, so the priests say, in return for the blood of the young.'

'You know they are no legend. A visit from them is well overdue.' She shuddered. 'I prefer to pretend they are not real.'

'Pretend or not, you cannot deny their existence.' He walked from the balustrade and took his wine from the table 'Even if you could make a case for their non-existence you must agree it would be better to stand united and ready to repel them, just in case.'

'You are spinning unattainable dreams, brother,' she said. 'You are mighty, but such as the Black Judges would crush you even if you had every satrapy and city state by your side.'

'Maybe' he said. He drained his goblet. It was five times the size of hers, but no matter how much he drank, he was never affected by the alcohol. 'Better to dream and fail than honour this poisonous status quo. Whoever I am, I was made for more than such a petty realm as Olympia.'

'You are beginning to believe your own legend.'

'I do not think for one moment, my little sister, that I am born of the gods.' He looked upwards past the edge of the awning. Threads of smoke from Olympia's industries rose into the sky, rolling over where warmer air interfaced with colder layers, leaving the high heavens clear. Behind the matchless blue, he could discern the queasy revolution of the star maelstrom. He looked at it as long as he dared, defying its baleful presence. 'But I am not from Olympia, of that I am sure.'

'Well,' she said, bringing the discussion to a close. She lifted the ewer. 'Empty. You drink so much! I am fetching myself some more wine.'

Perturabo made to rise. 'Let me go.'

'Oh no!' she said, smiling. 'You are not to be gallant. You are going into battle tomorrow. I will play servant.'

They had no one in attendance Servants and peons could not be trusted, all knew that, but Perturabo went further than most by having none himself and demanding the servants of others be absent when he visited - another oddity that set him apart from his peers.

Calliphone went through the archway into her apartments. Perturabo looked out over the city. His war machines rumbled as their engines turned over. The smell

of burning hydrocarbons wafted up from below. For a brief moment, he knew contentment. The most peaceful moments preceded war. He did not yet have the self-knowledge or the courage to acknowledge that he anticipated the coming violence. One day he would admit that killing calmed his troubled heart, and it would sorrow him.

A small noise made Perturabo move from the couch.

'Calliphone?' he called.

There was no reply. He listened carefully. Tiny scuffing noises came from inside, the sounds of a silent struggle.

Perturabo ran through the archway into her apartments without a moment's delay. A masked warrior had his foster sister about the throat, a knife pricking under her jaw. Two others stood at his side; their swords drawn.

'Take one more step, and your sister dies.'

'Behind you!' she screamed.

Perturabo turned to see two men leap at him from beside the pilasters of the arch. One he swatted with a backhand that sent the man crashing into a cabinet of ornaments with his ribs shattered. The second plunged his knife in the meat of Perturabo's shoulder. He grunted at the pain and stepped back, wrenching the weapon from the assassin's grasp. Coldness spreading from the wound indicated poison, and he wavered slightly. The knifeman leapt back, drawing a solid slug pistol. He fired three shots into Perturabo's chest as he advanced.

They did not slow him in the slightest.

He reached for the man, who swung recklessly for his head.

Grabbing his assailant's skull in one hand, Perturabo picked him up and swung him around like a flail. His feet, flung out by the rapidity of the motion, kicked one of the swordsmen in the face, sending him reeling. The second swordsmen struck with his blade. Perturabo blocked it, and it bit into his forearm. Perturabo kicked at the man, breaking his femur so hard that his leg folded backwards. The swordsman screamed and fell.

With a twist of his wrist, Perturabo broke the neck of the man whose head he gripped and threw him aside. His body hit the wall halfway to the ceiling, smearing it with blood. The poison made Perturabo woozy, but there was no toxin on Olympia that could fell him. The remaining swordsman charged, screaming war cries of the Thanatoi murder cults. Perturabo sidestepped his blow and punched him so hard that his face caved in.

That just left the assassin holding Calliphone.

'Not one more step!' said the man. 'Your life for hers.'

Perturabo's superhuman system was already shrugging off the effects of the poison and closing up his wounds.

'No,' he said. 'Your life for hers.'

He plucked the knife buried in shoulder and cast it with such speed that the assassin had no time to react. It hit him so hard that the hilt buried itself deep in his eye socket and the point burst from the back of his skull. Calliphone pushed his arm aside so that he would not cut her throat as he fell. She rubbed at her neck. 'That one still lives!' she managed.

The swordsman with the broken leg was crawling backwards, grasping his shattered limb with his good hand, agonised breath coming sharp through his teeth.

'Did you think that you might best me, Perturabo, in combat? That five of you would be enough?'

Perturabo bent down and grabbed the man by his jerkin and hauled him up. Holding him with one hand he ripped the mask away from his face, revealing the tattooed face of a Delchonian.

'Who is behind this?' demanded Perturabo. 'Who?'

'I won't talk,' said the Delchonian.

'Whoever was paying you, it was not enough. You would be wise to renounce your oaths of silence.'

The man spat full in Perturabo's face Bloody saliva slid down Perturabo's cheek. Rage screamed into his mind, and his reason fled.

Perturabo cast the mask down and began choking the swordsman. The man's face went crimson and his tongue bulged from his mouth.

'Who is behind this?' repeated Perturabo. 'Who? *Who*?'

The man gurgled. He might have being trying to talk, but if the noises he made were words, they were incomprehensible 'You will get nothing from him that way,' said Calliphone She grabbed Perturabo's arm and pulled. She might as well have tugged at a mountain. 'Stop. Save him for the torturers. Let them draw out the truth!'

Perturabo was not listening. The pounding of his pulse in his ears drowned out his sister's words. Dark fury had him. His face was tight with it.

'Perturabo!' Calliphone shouted.

He looked down at her with a twisted face and she backed away from his fury. Slowly, he came back into himself. The assassin hung limply in his grasp, his throat a bloody ruin. Perturabo's fingers had sunk so deeply into the dead man's neck that he gripped his spine. Perturabo dropped the corpse.

'I am… I am sorry,' he said, swallowing heavily. 'The danger to us, to you. I… I lost my temper. You were right. We should have kept him alive.'

'We'll never know who sent them now,' she said.

'Not in any useful time frame' he said. 'It could have been anyone. Dammekos, your brother…'

'Perturabo!' she said, genuinely shocked. 'You cannot say such things.'

'Is it not the Olympian way to present the iron facade to hide the fractures within? Your own brother would use you to get at me. You know he would.'

'You cannot prove that. That is a supposition too far, even for you. And father? How could you say that?'

Perturabo looked away. 'Who planned this is of little consequence. Do you see? The power games of the satraps and the tyrants must stop. True peace will come only when our world is united.'

'Which you would secure through force and treachery.'

He looked over the scattered bodies of the assassins. 'Treachery your people have taught me well enough. It is only through war that war will end and peace will come.'

'Oh my brother,' she said. 'I fear war will find you no matter where you go.'

'They won't surrender - you know that, Perturabo,' said Miltiades.

Perturabo's lips parted and he breathed out with displeasure. His hand tightened on the hilt of his sword. 'Use my title - Warlord of Lochos.'

'Really? Come on,' said Miltiades. 'I've known you since I plucked you off that cliff.'

The two of them stood high on a bluff overlooking the Kardikron Pass, the only way into the Vaulted City. Heavily defended by sue sets of walls each hundreds of metres high, the road made its unhurried way to the city gates of Kardis, seat of the Tyrant of Kardikora. They watched, surrounded by their staff, as Perturabo's tanks growled their way towards the first wall. The heavy plates of Perturabo's thick siege armour rasped as he looked down on his lieutenant.

'Firstly, I remember that I climbed that cliff on my own,' he said. 'Secondly, you are a soldier in my army now, optio, and you will use my rank when you address me.'

Miltiades worked his jaw and spat. He was getting old. His initial unease at being in Perturabo's presence had worn away through exposure. He no longer feared him, and was of such an age he had no fear of death either.

'You don't have to climb every mountain by yourself, *warlord*! Miltiades said pointedly.

'I can only rely on myself. Nothing else is certain in life but one's own strength. If I relied on the strength of others, then how could others rely on my strength? I am the superior being. I must support you. So yes, I do have climb every mountain myself.'

'Others made those things.' Miltiades pointed at the tanks, black on the hard white glare of the sunlit road. 'Others are the soldiers in your army. No peak stands alone, not even the tallest. All are parts of mountain chains, and so it is with men. It doesn't matter how much of a genius you are, Perturabo, you can't build every fortress with your own hands.'

'I am like no other man,' said Perturabo. He returned his attention to his tanks. They had almost reached the Guardian of Kardis, a giant drum tower bristling with guns which stood at one end of the first wall.

The two men were silent for the moment.

'Besides,' Perturabo added, 'I can think of three peaks that do stand alone on this continent.'

Miltiades grinned. 'Pedantry is a poor argument! My point is still valid. You will always have to rely on others. You cannot take Kardis on your own, if you can take it at all.'

'I can take it, and I will,' said Perturabo firmly.

The tanks rumbled forwards, two abreast. Smoke puffed from the Guardian's long-range batteries. A second later, the sound of their discharge reached Perturabo and Miltiades, a little noise like a cough that rose to a sighing rumble Plumes of earth heaved up from the road a few metres short of the tanks. The armoured vehicles continued forwards.

'They've ranged their guns well,' said Miltiades. 'They've had plenty of practice to get it right. Can we claim the same? Your marvellous landships are going to take a battering.'

'You do not allow for my understanding that fact and preparing for it.'

'Which means?'

'Thicker armour. Better metal. More powerful engines. You're going to be eating those words soon enough,' said Perturabo. He narrowed his eyes. A tank was hit directly. It rolled onwards, trailing fire from its armoured surfaces. Perturabo gave a curt nod to his orderlies. A flag bearer stood to attention at the edge of the cliff and raised two pennants.

A round exploded from the diff below them. 'They've seen us,' said Miltiades.

'That doesn't mean they can hit us,' snarled Perturabo, annoyed now by the man's constant gainsaying.

The orderly waved his flags in a stiff pattern, the fabric snapping in the cool mountain breeze. A handful of moments later, the distant thunder of artillery echoed up at the pass. The air whistled with the passage of shells. They banged into the side of the Guardian, the walls of the great tower erupting with stone and fire. The tower guns continued their barrage of the approaching tanks.

'I admit, they do move fast,' said Miltiades, watching the tanks. 'Better than steam. Why won't you tell me what you are doing? You can't break the tower with bombardment. I don't care how powerful you've made the guns.'

'Watch. Learn,' replied Perturabo. 'You will understand along with everyone else what you are dealing with soon enough.'

Now the tanks were in range, cannons on the wall joined fire with those of the tower. Men lining the parapet shot armour-killing rockets from crude shoulder launchers. These were made as counter to more primitive steam-driven vehicles, but they were fired in great numbers. One of the tanks exploded, finally giving in to the pounding the tower and walls were meting out to them. The tank following shunted its burning carcass aside in increments until it was leaned up against the steep slopes of the road. Several of them were wreathed in fire now but still operational. Another stopped dead, black smoke gouting from the round hole punched through its top armour.

The tanks arrayed themselves around the low gate of the first wall and began to pound it at point-blank range with their hull-mounted cannons. Sectioned cannon barrels recoiled like telescopes slamming shut Exhaust gases vented from muzzle ports, fogging the valley.

Perturabo watched impassively. Men were dying there, it was true, and more than the ritualised customs of war prevalent upon Olympia would ordinarily allow, but his plan would work. Shells rained onto the fat drum of the Guardian. They were landing close to his tanks, but he had sighted the pieces himself, and given detailed and strict instructions to his artillerists, the famed Stor-Bezashk of Lochos. For the moment, they were adhering to the letter of his commands, and every shell they flung slammed into the tower.

Miltiades had at last fallen silent. Perturabo knew he was thinking about the thickness of the Guardian's walls, and how well designed the massive steel gates of the pass fortifications were. He was probably close to voicing those thoughts. Perturabo really wished he wouldn't. He wanted the old warrior to do more than watch; he wanted him to see his worth, to see how his plan would overcome their old ally and open the continent to the domination of Lochos. He did not want his opinions on failure.

Perturabo admitted to himself that he wanted to impress Miltiades. He resolved to push such emotions away in future. They were distracting, and therefore dangerous.

The tanks were obscured by a haze of dust, smoke and fire, but the hollow ringing of shells on the steel gate continued. Perturabo ran through his calculations again. The gate was almost a metre thick, and made in one piece in the mills of the Kontoros. It was lipped all the way around and on both sides by perfectly fitted stone. The wall masonry was carved and set in such a way that each part locked into the other, the pressure of the stone itself making a whole from many components.

The gates were stronger than the walls. It would have been safer to bombard them from afar, one at a time, until they were all rubble.

But he needed to win a war, not a battle. Destroying the gates would send a message, as would a speedy conquest. Drawn-out sieges multiplied strategic risk, even if they lessened tactical danger. He needed the fear of his enemies more than he needed his men alive. He supposed he should feel regret for their inevitable deaths, and had been ready to stamp down hard on the feeling. With a certain amount of concern, he found he did not need to, for he felt no remorse whatsoever.

The booming of shell on steel suddenly changed, rising in pitch, becoming ragged.

'The gate is breached,' Perturabo said. 'Our men will be through shortly.'

He nodded at his ensign again. The man waved out another round of orders. From screens set out across the road further down, trucks began to drive quickly up.

'What are you doing?' said Miltiades in alarm. 'You can't send them into that cauldron!'

'I can, and I have,' said Perturabo coldly.

'Then you have killed most of them.'

'Their deaths are the means to an end.'

The first trucks entered the firing zone at full speed. Several were immediately destroyed.

'They are men, not munitions, damn it!' said Miltiades. 'There is no sense in victory if we all die achieving it.'

'Every living thing is a tool in the right hands,' said Perturabo without looking at him. 'And with them I shall fashion peace so that no others must die. Can you not see?'

'This is not the Olympian way,' said Miltiades.

'It is not,' said Perturabo. 'I will break Olympia, and remake it better and stronger.'

'This world is not your plaything.'

'I am not playing a game.'

With a screeching yawn, the gates gave in. Thick white smoke billowed outwards. The tanks advanced into the gate tunnel through a storm of fire flashing from the walls. Murder holes opened, and more flashes and bangs echoed from the gate tunnel as the defenders dropped bombs on Perturabo's vehicles. They emerged, all of them, into the ground separating the first wall from the second. Olympian technology was held back by a lack of resources rather than knowledge Perturabo's ingenuity had found a way around this, creating novel alloys and engineering solutions that advanced Lochos' weaponry far beyond that of its enemies. This was a good thing, because with the unprovoked attack on Kardis, they now had a great many foes.

Automated heavy-calibre machine guns emerged from the tanks' hulls, cutting down the defenders coming into the square. Horns blared, and the second gate dropped down, blocking the way once more.

Troop compartments opened. Hundreds of men of Lochos poured out of the backs of the tanks and ran for the first wall. They went within and began a slaughter of the defenders. The flicker of lightning guns lit up the clouds of battle. There were three hundred of these precious weapons in the arsenal of Lochos. Perturabo had emptied it before he had left.

The cannon fire from the wall subsided. Perturabo's tanks began to fire upon the second gate Protected by the first wall from the Guardian, they could fight in relative safety, weathering only the attentions of the troops manning the second wall. The surviving trucks had reached the first wall, and they sped into the courtyard, disgorging their passengers. Dragging ladders from the sides of their vehicles, the men mounted an escalade on the second wall under the cover of the men in the first, dividing the defenders' fire Explosions boomed from the base of the Guardian as the men of Lochos attempted to blast their way in through the reinforced doors of its supply tunnels. Fighting broke out along the parapet of the second wall. All was proceeding to Perturabo's plan, as precise as the workings of his clockwork models.

'Send orders that the artillery stand down and prepare to move to the first wall,' said Perturabo. A messenger bowed and ran off immediately. The order was also relayed by semaphore.

'It's taking too long to take the Guardian,' said Miltiades.

'The guns will be silent within minutes,' replied Perturabo.

'It's never been taken,' said Miltiades. 'Though I admit, your plan is working.'

'I am not going to take it. I will destroy it so Kardis is aware of our intentions.'

'Impressive,' said Miltiades grudgingly. 'But there are six walls in total in the Kardikron pass. It will take too long to breach them all. The allies of Kardis will soon be on their way here Many of the other cities are itching for a chance to cast Lochos down. There is a danger here, warlord, that you have done nothing more than give them excuse to destroy us.'

'How long do you suppose it will take me to break the walls and take the city?' asked Perturabo. He looked up the pass where four more walls joined cliff to cliff, each higher than the last. The pale shapes of the city's bastions were behind, shrouded by the dusty air.

'The citadel, too? A fortnight,' said Miltiades. 'I'm being very generous, and assuming you don't run out of men. This assault was reckless.'

'It was perfectly calculated and played out exactly as I planned. You saw it. I will have this city in my hands within three days.'

Miltiades shrugged. He didn't seem to care either way.

Perturabo smiled to himself. The fighting was subsiding along the first two walls. The rear of each wall was vulnerable to the attentions of the next, but the first courtyard was safe, and his tanks would prevent Kardis from retaking the second.

A tremendous explosion blew out from the bottom of the Guardian Tower. Huge pieces of masonry tumbled down the outward face of the fort The guns were still firing as the whole of the outer side heeled sideways and slipped down the cliff, sending massive chunks of masonry bouncing down the pass like a child's set of blocks kicked over.

'It may be that you prove to be right,' conceded Miltiades.

Perturabo cast aside the dead body of Adophus, the Tyrant of Kardikora, and sat himself upon the throne. The hall of the tyrant was very different to that of Lochos in appearance, its architectural flourishes determined by the local geology and the quirks of the Kardikron national character. In every other way it was exactly the same, a monument built at stupendous expense to show a tyrant's power. It was a fitting place for Perturabo to exercise his own.

Crowds of nobles, generals and the richest of Kardis' merchants filled the hall. Smoke rose all over the city, the tang of it penetrating even into the tyrant's throne room. Terror added its own acridity to the fug. The noble's nervous eyes

strayed to the tyrant's bloody corpse.

Perturabo stared at them, calculating their worth to him. Their deaths would please him, he could not deny it. They were so proud, so arrogant. He had had enough of such hauteur, and though he could not kill all the preening lords of Lochos, he could destroy these here It was in his power to do so. Their deaths would have their own effect on the war he had planned. Some of the cities would capitulate quickly through fear; others, driven by the same emotion, would have their resolve stiffened. He thought on it while they stood in silence, too cowardly to ask their fate while their city burned around them.

The four-hour looting was underway, as custom demanded. Perturabo would let his men sate their desire for trinkets and mayhem. There were precious few other laws of battle that he intended to obey. This was a new kind of war.

Clemency or ruthlessness? He could see the merits of both. He sat back in the tyrant's throne. It was so oversized that it fit him perfectly. His bloodied fingers slipped on its armrests.

Finally, Perturabo spoke. 'You have seen how quickly we overcame you,' he said. 'I sit here wondering upon your fate. I am a proponent of logic. I ponder whether your deaths are more useful to me than your lives.'

He paused to let what he was saying sink in. He need not leave it long; they understood full well already.

'But not every variable can be inserted into a calculation of war, and I have to ask myself instead, how will I be seen? And, you must wonder, how do I wish to be seen? Logic dictates that I set aside all emotion and make my decisions based on what is verifiable alone. I cannot. I try, but success eludes me, for as much as I strive to leave behind the concerns of the flesh, and as different to you as I am, I am still a man. I have no desire to be a tyrant. I have victory, and no need for vengeance. The war I bring to you unexpectedly, and regretfully, is prosecuted in the name of a higher ideal - that of peace, not savagery.'

Some in the crowd made faces of contempt. A couple of them looked as if they would speak. Perturabo spoke louder.

'For peace can come from war. Not the short peace that Olympia enjoys, but a long and total peace where no man needs raise his weapon against another. I speak to you of a new era.'

'Peace from iron!' called an elderly man. 'That is no peace at all.'

'It is peace.' Perturabo paused. 'You are Antibus of Kardis. I know your books. I know your mind from reading them. You speak, too, from your heart, as I am forced to do now. Your writings have taught me how to do so, and for that I

thank you. We understand each other. It behoves me to be merciful. None of you shall die. You shall keep all your offices and properties, and such political powers as you possess. But these shall be employed within the greater realm of Lochos.'

'He proposes satrapy!' scoffed Antibus. 'Listen to him! This goes against all our customs. We are not a minor city, but one of the twelve!'

'No more,' said Perturabo. 'Submit to me, and you shall prosper alongside Lochos. Your men shall serve in our armies. Your mines will be open to us. I will bring you riches and advances in your sciences that you cannot as yet comprehend.'

'And if we decline?' said Antibus.

'Then I shall kill you all. And after I have wiped your blood from my hands, I will bend all my efforts to tearing this city down, stone by stone, until nothing remains and all its people are gone into slavery.'

'That is not peace!'

'Death is the greatest peace of all,' said Perturabo. 'Unending and total. I prefer other lands, but I can give you death's peace, if that is the peace you would prefer.'

Not long after, the flag of Lochos rose over the parapets and broken towers of Kardis. A wealth of scarce minerals was Perturabo's from that moment, and he had such plans for them.

The unification of Olympia had begun.

TEN

MIGRATION

999.M30

THE *IRON BLOOD*, GUGANN SYSTEM, SAK'TRADA DEEPS

Perturabo stood alone in the middle of the featureless iron sphere of the strategium minoris that opened high up the wall of the command deck. There was a podium at the centre, railed around by simple steel.

From his position he could observe everything that happened on the multistoried bridge. Tiers of servitor choirs banked high around the shipmaster's dais, as if an audience at an amphitheatre with their backs to the stage. The shipmaster was a small thing from so far away, embedded in the fabric of the ship at the centre of the dais.

The great hololithic displays turning in the airy voids of the deck were at Perturabo's command. If he chose, he could scrutinise the efforts of the transmechanics as they tended to the *Iron Blood's* machinery, or oversee his legionaries pacing the decks in full armour or attending to the tasks of long-range destruction at the weapons banks.

But he looked on none of it.

Perturabo's ice-blue eyes stared into a distance only he could apprehend. To the casual observer, he would appear to be struck dumb, or paralysed with

indecision. Multiple data-streams fed directly into his cerebral cortex by the input cables adorning his skull. A hundred vox-streams played through his mind from his ships, many carrying the screams of his men. Screams were unimportant to him. He concentrated on the data-screed pouring through his consciousness, a thousand viewpoints of the battle, in every conceivable form. He picked apart the information, rendering it down to its rawest form. Life and death were reduced to numbers. There was no space for equivocal variables. The integers of existence danced through the halls of his mind.

Victory was a one, defeat a zero. These were the only two results he cared for. His men died for their determination.

Via his connections, he lived the death of ships. An escort was caught in an entropy beam, all matter within the compass of its temporal field forced into an unvarying baseline heat state. Atoms dispersed. With the radioactive rush of fleeing neutrons, the craft collapsed, leaving behind it a brief window into the death of the universe. Pain afflicted him as the animal parts of his mind assigned sensation to the information received. Perturabo bathed in agony, but he locked it away. His prodigious intellect swept through the battle, directing his ships with flair while his soul burned under a million different stimuli.

There was no viewport, of course. The front portion of the command deck was panelled by blank slabs of plasteel armour, stamped with the grinning skull badge of his Legion. Hololithic displays showed a true pict-feed of Gugann and the war around it the for the benefit of his men.

The 125th Expeditionary Fleet was arrayed about the hrud world, committed to a preliminary bombardment before an assault on the prime hrud warren. Every day more hrud arrived in the system.

Most passed through, but some remained to reinforce their capital world. Hrud ships hung in a petalled defensive arrangement directly over the underground city. Their ships were indistinct smears, nearly invisible behind their layers of shifting time fields. Solid munitions impacted these temporal wave fronts, vanishing as bright bursts of annihilated matter. Only las-beams and nova shells - the latter detonated close by the ships to avoid their simpler brethren's fate - seemed to penetrate the hrud's esoteric shielding.

Several xenos vessels drifted lifelessly, fires burning weirdly fast in their failing entropic fields. The others were implacable. Like time itself, the vessels were an enemy that could not be overcome. From their flaring weapons blisters came temporal rays that enveloped the ships of the Iron Warriors and spirited them forwards in time to the death of all things.

The stasis tactic had worked well - too well. Things had changed. The hrud had been provoked into flight, and they were countering even as they ran.

Perturabo's servants went about their work with the cold efficiently characteristic of his Legion. However, they did not have the ruthless certainty of their lord, and their eyes strayed with concern to the casualty count. They were distracted by the bright lightning flashes of ship death.

The *Iron Blood* trembled to the ceaseless discharge of macro cannon batteries. Winking explosions peppered the surface of the planet, spreading concentric rings of fire through its thin atmosphere. The wrath of the IV Legion did not seem to be enough to steady the Space Marines. In the hearts and minds of the ruthless siege masters, the fear of defeat once again raised its ugly head.

Perturabo saw none of this. His thoughts were turned ever inwards into the four-dimensional construct his brain had fashioned from battle inputs. Less than real, it nevertheless dispensed with distractions such as the life and death of the men under his command. War was an equation, whose total sum was of no consequence, as long as it remained above zero. Anything over that denoted victory, and he would have it at any cost.

His crew were a distraction also. Though they toiled and shouted from their gunnery command pits and servitor arrays, where he could the primarch bypassed his deck officers and their tiers of authority, instead sending his orders directly via hardline to the gun-team captains or the enginseers of the enginarium; sometimes he cut even them out of the process and directed individual servitors himself.

The crews of Iron Warriors warships were smaller than those of other Legions. All unnecessary hierarchy had been stripped out of their organisation. Where possible, the Lord of Iron avoided the use of purely human crew, preferring instead to rely on his own legionaries, with menial tasks taken up by the cyborg dead. Not for him the duplication in duty of legate and admiral, or captain and shipmaster. His warsmiths were the backbone of his Legion and his fleet. It enabled him to manage everything himself, the way he liked.

'As above, so below,' he said through gritted teeth.

His mind moved impossibly quickly, faster than the finest Mechanicum cogitator array. It was not fast enough. Were it not for his profoundly stubborn nature, Perturabo would also have admitted that there were simply too many of the hrud to deal with. Defeat stared him in the face. He refused to acknowledge it.

They came in swarms from the worlds of the Sak'trada Deeps; not only from

Gugann, but all the other planets in that strange cluster. There were no measurable communications between the xenos worlds, nothing to indicate that they shared information at all, but shortly after the use of the temporal bomb on Gugann, the hrud had begun to move en masse.

At first, Perturabo had taken their panic as the first signs of victory. He anticipated the campaign's end by wiping out the xenos as they ran. It was not to be so. Billions of hrud were passing through the primarch's position in their rout from the sector.

The Iron Warriors were being overwhelmed.

First came the foray parties, projected through time and space upon the tips of focused spears of temporal energy. Many of these had attempted to stow away on the 125th Expeditionary Fleet's ships, as was the hrud's racial habit. Cannily, they targeted the vessels of the Legion's penal auxiliaries, but the xenos were no safer from persecution there than aboard Space Marine vessels. Hourly purgation teams swept the decks of Perturabo's fleet, seeking out infestations that had slipped the bonds of reality to take up residence in out-of-the-way corners.

The migration ships came next, weird agglomerations of plated fungal matter, so far as could be discerned through their null-time blind shields. Hundreds of these slipped through the Legion picket fleets ringing the subsector.

Worse was to come. The xenos had a last surprise.

'Look at the planet! *The planet*!'

The subaltern's voice was frightened enough to distract Perturabo from his screeds of data. More shouts rose up from the deck at his feet. Slowly, his eyes refocused from the mental construct he had conjured for himself, and he looked upon the surface of Gugann with his men.

The planet was heaving, giant fissures breaking across its tortured surface. Orange magma glow flashed and faded around the shifting parts of Gugann's crust, its cooling accelerated by the hrud's strange influence before whatever was moving beneath broke the surface again and the light shone anew.

'I ordered no Exterminatus!' bellowed Perturabo in a fury. 'We have been ordered to take these worlds intact!'

'No order was given,' replied his shipmaster robotically. Perturabo knew this well, because he knew everything. He cursed the weakness his outburst revealed and fought his anger back down.

Gugann shook.

Pillars of lava, miles high, blasted into space, raining back down onto the planet's surface with the force of cometary impacts.

'The city,' said Forrix, who was watching everything from the main deck level. He gripped the edge of the rail about the hololith projection pipes. He stared up at his master. 'The entire city is moving.' Gugann trembled on its axis as the hrud capital warren broke free from the bedrock. Blinding veils of white light propelled it upwards, pushing the impossible mass into orbit using the substance of the world as fuel. A sea of magma boiled where it had torn itself from the ground. Still the Iron Warriors fleet rained fire down onto the surface, opening up more wounds, but these were mere puddles of fire compared to the ocean the hrud themselves had gouged into the rocky flesh of their world. Teardrops of lava plummeted from the underside of the capital warren.

'That thing's the size of a continent,' said Forrix. His tone was changing, becoming excited.

'My lord!' called up an astropathic liaison. 'I am receiving word of similar breakouts at Jupor, Hranenen and Voltis.'

'They are vulnerable!' shouted Forrix. He walked around the hololith pit. 'All vessels, open fire on the city vessel.'

New firing solutions were quickly formulated. Lance beams converged on the hrud warren-craft.

Perturabo did not share his first captain's excitement. He looked on with mounting horror as the hrud ships fell into formation with the giant vessel floating up from the surface of Gugann. They rotated around the city warren, forming a hollow cube Painfully bright arcs of light leapt from their scabrous hulls and joined them to the city-ship. 'All ships, belay that!' roared Perturabo. 'Evasive action!'

A sickening flicker surrounded the hrud vessels. Their image smeared on the hololith, and they blinked out of existence.

From every augury station on the deck, tocsins clamoured. Perturabo dipped into the data-streams still cascading through his mind. Where the hrud vessels had been, space was convulsing. 'We have a temporal collapse!'

'What?' shouted Forrix.

'They have torn a hole in space and time. Get us about, shipmaster!' Perturabo roared. Alarms whooped. The *Iron Blood* shook from stem to stem as its engines powered up to full. Its vast spear-tip prow swung about. Other vessels were attempting their own escape, sharp blades of engine wash stabbing from their stacks. They rolled as retrothrusters puffed out fire and vapour all along their flanks. The Iron Warriors' habitual good order collapsed, and the fleet became a collection of desperate individual vessels.

'Full motive!' ordered Perturabo. 'Divert all power to the engine stacks! Forty degrees down and starboard - get our prow pointing directly away from the temporal surge.'

'My lord, that heading will put the *Magnificence of Steel* directly athwart our passage,' called out an auspex operative.

'Order them to accelerate If they are not clear, smash them out of the way!' the primarch commanded. He abandoned his station in the strategium minoris, exiting it via a door that hissed into the sphere's shell at his approach, and ran down spiral stairs to the main deck to stand before the giant, luminous globe of the hololith. 'Time to impact!' he commanded.

Hearing the primarch's voice, a hundred servitors responded together. 'Five minutes, twenty-one seconds to impact.'

'We're not going to make it,' said Forrix angrily. He slammed his armoured hand into the rail around the hololith pit, denting it.

The temporal shock wave emanating from the hrud's departure point travelled at only a fraction of the speed of light. Its lack of speed made it all the more terrifying; it was an oily roll in the space-time continuum that moved towards them with the deceptive slowness of a tsunami. The hololith struggled to depict what the augurs detected. Gugann jumped about, its image blocky with poorly formed projection streams. A loop-projector exploded under the strain. The hololith blinked, then stabilised as men shouted and ordered servitors to reroute the image collation through back-up systems.

In his mind's eye, Perturabo saw what the planet would look like through the temporal wave: a moon's reflection on a pool shattered into a thousand curved pieces by a cast stone.

'Three minutes, three seconds to impact.'

'We are bearing down on the *Magnificence of Steel*,' reported the shipmaster. He had been deeply immured within the *Iron Blood's* systems for so long that the man no longer had a name. 'Range, fifty kilometres.'

'The *Magnificence of Steel* will not get clear - we're going to hit it!' shouted the auspex operative.

'Calm yourself!' snarled his superior.

'Open me a vox link!' demanded Perturabo.

'Compliance,' droned a servitor.

'*Magnificence of Steel*, remove yourself from our path or we will be forced to go through you.'

'*Primarch*,' replied the ship's commander - an Iron Warrior by the name of

Urdek, Perturabo recalled. '*Our enginarium is overrun with hrud foray teams*. *Our reactor is ungoverned and overloaded*. *We are moving at half power*.' There was no hint of complaint or plea to Urdek's report.

'Are there other reports of hrud boarding?' asked Perturabo.

'A few incursions,' replied the master of vox after a few, hurried inquiries. 'Nothing major. All contained.'

'It is not in their nature to risk themselves,' said Forrix. 'They seek to trap you. They see the *Iron Blood* as too dangerous to board. They expect you to stop.' He glanced up at his gene-father. 'They do not know you very well.'

'Captain Urdek, abandon your ship. Launch saviour pods now.'

'*Yes*, *my lord*. *I will remain on board and attempt to steer the* Magnificence *from your path*.'

Perturabo gave no thanks or valedictory words to his captain. He expected his warriors to die for him without question.

'Put the forward view on the main hololith,' ordered Perturabo. 'Shipmaster, accelerate to maximum speed.'

'We risk killing ourselves,' said Forrix.

'We will suffer major damage if we are too close when the reactor explodes,' said Perturabo.

The *Iron Blood* rumbled. Metal squealed in its superstructure under the strain of the thrust generated by its massive engines. Officers muttered to one another and worked quickly at the master controls for the ship's integrity fields, adjusting the energy matrices embedded in the craft's skeleton to brace its members and prevent them from tearing themselves apart.

The tactical view of the battlefield vanished from the main hololith, and the *Iron Blood's* forward view came into being. Sure enough, the *Magnificence of Steel* blocked their way. A grand cruiser, it was far less than the *Iron Blood's* Gloriana-class tonnage.

'Maybe we can adjust our course a few degrees,' said Forrix.

'Under this acceleration, we risk breaking the ship's back,' said Perturabo. 'Aegis control, divert all power to the forward void shields. Prow lances, stand by to open fire on my command.'

The space around the *Magnificence of Steel* twinkled as hundreds of saviour pods burst from their launch apertures, carrying away every important member of the crew. There were never enough for everyone aboard. Thousands of serfs would be left behind to die. Perturabo spared no more thought for them than he did for a raindrop in a storm.

'Ramming speed!' he said. 'We shall show the hrud the measure of our mercy.'

The *Magnificence of Steel* grew from a bright needle to a massive, crenellated edifice nearly eight kilometres long. Its engine flare stuttered, its acceleration insufficient to propel it out of the *Iron Blood's* way.

'Range, one kilometre,' said the nameless shipmaster.

The iron-grey side of the ship grew to fill the whole of the hololithic sphere. The flagship's alarms became a clamour.

'Fire!' ordered Perturabo.

The *Magnificence of Steel* accepted its fate quietly. The full fury of the *Iron Blood's* prow lance battery hit it amidships, carving molten gouges deep into its hull. The flagship opened fire again seconds before its bladed prow cleaved into the side of its sister vessel.

'Brace!' yelled the master of serfs. Mortal warriors hit the floor. Legionaries set their feet apart. The clunking of magnetic soles locking to the deck plating was the last ordinary sound before the ear-shattering crash of the *Iron Blood* hitting the *Magnificence of Steel* upended the world.

Perturabo was one of the few on the deck who kept his feet as the ships collided. The entire craft shivered from stem to stem as its ram crashed into the weakened middle of the *Magnificence of Steel*, breaking it in two. Legionaries were torn from their feet by the impact and serfs were flung into their work stations. Servitors jerked and died through sensory overload. The smell of cooked meat wafted over the deck as their cybernetic components fried.

Burning metal and flash-frozen atmosphere clouded the hololithic view. The whirling, terrified face of a dead serf connected with a pict-feed lens near the prow, ghastly in magnification.

The *Iron Blood* was through.

'Time to temporal-wave impact!' demanded Perturabo.

'One minute, three seconds,' responded the servitors.

According to his calculations, the wave would already be hitting the trailing ships of the Space Marine fleet 'Give me a stern view!' ordered Perturabo. 'Show me my fleet.'

A viewscreen as big as a sail came on, displaying a grainy rear view half whited out by the *Iron Blood's* own engine flare.

The Iron Warriors vessels were running, engines burning at maximum. The temporal wave bodily tilted them, like an object sliding down a lifted blanket. Those at the rear were caught in a wash of painful unlight The rearmost came to flaming pieces. A next aged a million years in a moment, its hull visibly

corroding and its engine light dying until it was a crumpled, rusting hulk.

The temporal wave continued onwards through the Space Marine fleet, crippling ships and ageing crews to dust in seconds.

The effects were unpredictable. Some ships appeared to accelerate backwards at unimaginable speed until they vanished. Others disappeared into showers of disassociated particles. The result, however, was always the same: death and more death. The vox clamoured with screams and desperate shouts for aid from rapidly ageing throats.

'Twenty seconds to impact,' droned the servitors.

'Faster!' yelled Perturabo.

'The *Iron Blood* proceeds at maximum acceleration, my lord,' mumbled the encased shipmaster.

The ship began to shake again to a different resonance. The outlying disturbance of the wave reached into its fabric and teased at its atomic structure, temporal disruption perturbing the very forces that bound it together.

'Impact… Impact… Impact…' droned the servitors.

The *Iron Blood* rolled up and forwards as the ripple in the fabric of space-time passed under it. Alarms of every kind wailed. Metal screamed. Machines exploded. Time ran in confusing eddies. A bank of servitors aged to withered flesh and discoloured components while the group next to them were untouched. Different parts of the ship were forcibly jumped into different frames of reference, matter displacing seconds in time with explosive results. Space Marines toppled over, spilling dust and desiccated bone fragments from their scattering armour plates. A servitor vanished, replaced by the man he used to be, his reborn face insane with shock as he shucked off mechanical components and stood, unscarred. Some of the crew disappeared. Others collapsed into a cloud of black carbon dust.

Human senses were not designed to cope with such upheaval to reality, and men fell vomiting. Perturabo struggled to keep his mind together as the order of the world was overthrown. Events jumped out of sequence. The ache of great age bloomed in his bones.

The wave passed. The ship shuddered, as if it too were sickened. Fires burned unchecked in various quarters. Frantic damage reports barked from unmanned vox units. Part of the high roof fell down with a deafening crash.

Of all his crew, Perturabo alone stood. Mortals groaned, and the reedy, feeble cries of the elderly emanated from sparking work stations. Somewhere, a child was crying.

'Shipmaster,' he said. No response.

Perturabo marched to the metal scaffold that had encysted the man. Putrescent matter dripped from the apparatus. A naked skull glistened wetly inside.

He attempted his direct link with the vessel's cogitators, only to be greeted with garbled nonsense.

'Give me the hololith, pict screens, anything!' shouted Perturabo. 'I must see my ships!'

'*Com… Com… Compliance*,' a malfunctioning servitor groaned. Broken ribbon projectors crackled in the hololith pit, painting in a view of the area line by line.

Gugann was a shattered mess. Clouds of debris trailed out into high orbit. A giant caldera, hundreds of kilometres across, boiled where the hrud's primary warren had been. The surface flashed with the impact of falling rocks. Lightning wracked its thickened clouds.

However, the change to the planet was as nothing compared to that wrought at the heart of the system. The sun, nameless but for a string of astrogation numbers, had swollen to double its size, accelerated out of the main sequence and into stellar senescence It appeared that not even stars were free from the hrud's devastating influence.

The time wave should not have hit the star so quickly. Perturabo had ceased trying to apply the usual paths of logic to the hrud and their effects on the universe, and he supposed that were he a mortal man his attempts to understand would have driven him mad. The sun had progressed from a small yellow star to a swelling red giant in a matter of minutes. Huge solar flares looped lazily out from its equator, sending sprays of light-speed particles sleeting through his fleet.

Vox communication was down. It was a kind of mercy that he could not yet learn how bad the damage was. The 125th Expeditionary Fleet was scattered across at least one astronomical unit of space or more. Its ships listed, powerless.

A cruiser exploded into a perfect sphere of light as he watched.

The *Iron Blood's* cogitators were coming back online. Servitors were returning to consciousness; surviving Mechanicum adepts bustled from place to place. Slowly, function returned to the flagship.

Perturabo's eyes were fixed unblinkingly on the devastation outside.

As he watched his ships die, his men thrown away for no good end, he could think only one thing.

This pointless, ruinous campaign was the fault of the Emperor's vanity.

ELEVEN

SHAME

999.M30
THE *IRON BLOOD*, GUGANN SYSTEM

Crippled by extreme age, Dantioch walked slowly towards Perturabo's throne. The triarchs looked on him with mixture of contempt and pity. To have such a weakling as a member of the Legion was an affront to their sensibilities, but they were cognisant that in this war the same fate could befall them all too easily. Dantioch's footsteps were not quite halting but were not far from it He stopped hallway to the throne of the primarch, and his body shook as he stifled a powerful cough. His sighs as the spasm passed could not be held back.

Perturabo sat in angry judgement over his warsmith, but seeing him so broken stirred pity in him.

'Dantioch, what has happened to you?' he said.

'The hrud,' the warsmith replied. His voice previously smooth, had a rough edge to it, like a nicked blade. He reached the foot of the throne. With pronounced difficulty he knelt and bowed his head. 'My lord, the Vulpa Straits are lost.'

The concern of the primarch for his son was gone in an instant 'I left you in command of three worlds, Dantioch. You dare to come here and tell me that you let all of them slip through your fingers?' Perturabo's shout silenced his birds'

gentle cooing. 'Many millions of hrud have passed through this system, and you dare to inform me that there will be nothing to stop their escape?'

Fingers fumbling with the catches, Dantioch took off his helmet and raised his head. Perturabo paused at the sight of the warsmith's ravaged face Dantioch's hair had thinned to a few greasy strands scraped back over a liver-spotted, shining scalp. The skin atop his skull was taut, while that on his face hung in sagging pouches from the bones. Yellowed eyes peered from complex folds of skin, the orbits of them purplish. His lips had thinned to pink traces atop a chin riven with deep lines. His skull was visible under his face as if the skin was a loose cloth cast over a grisly trophy. He was physically lessened by age though his eyes shone with all the determination he had ever had.

'Look upon me and you might understand why,' said Dantioch. 'The Apothecaries believe I have aged somewhere in the region of three thousand years. Apparently, we of the Legiones Astartes are not functionally immortal after all.'

Perturabo found it hard to look at his warsmith. He found such decay of the flesh unseemly. Stone and iron decayed, everything decayed, but the rapidity with which the human body ceased good function and began to collapse offended his sense of order. Humanity was, in many ways, despicable 'Others have suffered the same fate and yet they fulfill the orders given them,' said the Primarch. 'You were told to hold the straits. You did not.'

Dantioch got to his feet with a grunt of pain. 'I could not. Your orders were impossible to complete, though we tried to do so, and failing you fills me with the greatest of regrets. Were the hrud not to have begun this migration, I would have succeeded easily.'

'This enemy is less predictable than I would like,' said Perturabo. Dantioch swallowed before he spoke again. His saliva was sticky. 'They are predictable. My lord, one of my sergeants, Zolan, insisted that I should consider withdrawal. I refused to listen to him. You had ordered us to hold, so we held. We have lost the majority of my grand battalion as a result of it. The Fifty-First Fleet is shattered.'

'You lost it because you were weak,' said Perturabo in disgust, his voice as frigid as deep space 'Because I refused to bend!' said Dantioch. 'As much as it angered me to have Zolan speak to me in that manner, I find myself coming to you, our gene-father, with similar tidings. Abandon this campaign, my lord.'

Perturabo's face crumpled with fury. He flushed, and his hands clenched the arms of his throne so hard the metal creaked.

'My lord, listen to me,' said Dantioch hurriedly. 'I have examined all the histories we have concerning these xenos since I returned to the One Hundred and Twenty-First Fleet. You have evidently had some success against them, but you have scared the temporaferrox into fleeing. They were beginning to move before your deployment of the temporal weapon, but its use has prompted a full-scale migration. What is our plan now? We cannot slay them all. Here is the greatest concentration of hrud in known space We risk the Legion. The migration endangers the Cadomus System, and that will only be the start. The war must stop. This subsector must be declared Perdita and warding beacons set about it, so that it may be addressed with a larger force at a future date Perhaps if we withdraw now, the migration will falter, and the damage will be contained.'

Perturabo glared fiercely at Dantioch, but the warsmith was undaunted.

'My lord,' Dantioch went on, 'as an Iron Warrior, as your son, it shames me to the core of my being to suggest we should pursue this course of action, but should all the hrud migrate out of this subsector, we shall be the instigators of a problem that will persist for hundreds of years, destabilising a large portion of the galactic north. We should withdraw, my lord, and reaffirm our orders Perhaps there had been some kind of mistake—'

This last statement was too much for the Lord of Iron.

'*The Emperor of Mankind makes no mistakes*!' shouted Perturabo. He powered to his feet, towering over the ruined warsmith. 'His plans are flawless - how could it be any other way?'

Dantioch did not like the bitterness of this statement. 'Then perhaps, my lord, it is your mistake in persisting with this campaign in the face of all available information.'

For a moment, Dantioch thought that Perturabo would strike him dead there and then. The primarch's giant frame tensed, his oversized warsuit growling with the anticipation of action.

Dantioch stared fearlessly into his lord's eyes. 'There is no shame in admitting defeat,' he said softly. 'No man can win every battle. Not even a primarch. Not even you.'

'As you demonstrate so well,' said Perturabo. He exhaled noisily, his breath hot with unspent rage. 'Do not presume to advise me, you who cannot keep three pathetic worlds.' He took a step back, tension bleeding off him. 'I release you from your orders, warsmith, and give you fresh ones. Lesser Damantyne has been marked for compliance, and thereafter will require a new regent. Go there. Take whatever dregs of your grand company remain to you, take it and then hold

it for me. There are no real threats there, only aggressive native zooforms. I trust dealing with them remains within the scope of your abilities.'

'I have but two hundred and forty warriors left to me, and only one remains from my command group on Gholghis, my lord.' Dantioch stiffened with the insult done to his men. 'He will gladly go where I go, if you command it. I have my ships.'

Perturabo looked down at the warsmith grimly. 'I once considered you as fit for my Trident. Now I see that I was wrong. You are a disgrace to this Legion, Dantioch. I never wish to look upon your face again.'

Dantioch's expression set. He bowed his head, crushed. Trembling with emotion, he spoke.

'As you command, my lord, so shall it be done.'

TWELVE

REBELLION

999.M30

THE *IRON BLOOD*, GUGANN SYSTEM

The week after the hrud migrated from Gugann, the fleet waited vainly for its master's command. Perturabo gave no orders. He closeted himself away in his command chamber alone. No gathering of warsmiths was called, no edicts offered. It was left to the warsmiths and the captains of the Iron Warriors to begin regathering the scattered forces of the 125th Expeditionary Fleet. Their task was thankless, and complex.

Solar flares troubled the battered fleet for hours after the departure of the hrud, rendering communication nigh on impossible. Messages were reduced to pulsed laser signals. Multiple ships had their shields overwhelmed by the constant torrent of energy pouring from the damaged sun, and three of those took further damage that crippled them. The critical nature of this damage necessitated the diversion of other vessels to put the crippled ships under tow or, in the worst cases, facilitate their evacuation. These operations strained relations between the warsmiths in command of the various grand battalions, further complicating matters. All the Iron Warriors' logistical expertise was required to reform their battle-group, but slowly the fleet regathered, and such repairs as could be made

without orbital facilities were begun.

It was Forrix, first captain, to whom responsibility fell. Three standard Terran days went by without any sign of the primarch, and all attempts to contact him were unsuccessful. The doors to the command chamber remained sealed.

Forrix ordered the fleet towards the gravipause between Gugann and its nearest sibling. He had scout ships scour every world. They all reported the same thing: empty warrens beneath the honeycombed land masses, containing nothing but the foetid rags of dead xenos. The hrud had deserted the system completely. Astropathic messages came in from subdivisions of the fleet in nearby systems. Several were also devoid of the hrud, though in others the xenos presence persisted. Lacking guidance, Forrix drew plans up for their extermination with his fellow triarchs, Harkor and Golg.

It was therefore to everyone's great surprise when Perturabo emerged from his sanctum unannounced and attended the Dodekatheon, the legionary order drawn from Olympia's ancient clandestine society of masons.

Forrix, Golg and Harkor were pacing the long triumphal way that ran up to the base of the *Iron Blood's* ram. In contrast to the rest of the prow, which was crammed with lance batteries, torpedo tubes and all the many systems that made them function, the open space of the Mason's Hall seemed an indulgence, but it too had a purpose The tall buttressing that crossed the space was angled slightly towards the prow. The rib vaulting increased the strength of the ship abeam. Beyond the forward wall were the ram's shock halls, housing pistons the size of escort ships whose sleeves were filled with lakes of hydraulic fluid. The whole of the Mason's Hall was nothing more than an elaborate crumple zone for the *Iron Blood*.

It was fitting, Forrix had always thought, that the Brotherhood of Stone should meet there, for the Dodekatheon served a similar purpose for the Legion: a place where rivalries could clash and inflict minimal damage on the whole.

The triarchs wore their full armour burnished to an oily sheen. Many of the other warsmiths and captains present were dressed in robes of hessian decorated with chainmail patches over their body gloves, but Forrix believed that a triarch should always appear ready for war.

Strategy boards occupied much of the hall's space These were thronged by Iron Warriors arguing how best to represent the hrud in their simulated battles. Their recent setbacks had exercised their minds as much as their anger, and ambitious warsmiths could see the glory to be won if they concocted a winning strategy.

In truth, all warsmiths were ambitious, and they all had different ideas. In the

first place, they could not agree how best to test their theories. Those that favoured the purity of wood block formations and outcomes decided by the casting of ten-sided dice argued bitterly with the proponents of cogitator-assisted hololith battle simulators. They in turn nearly came to blows with those who insisted that the hrud's unpredictability could only be modelled by savant brains deliberately altered to be insane, then linked in complex series. The followers of the Brethren of Thunder - the so-called Burned Men - gathered there also, putting forward their ideas for novel weapons tailored to defeat the xenos. Their suggestions generated more discussion as various warsmiths supported or rubbished their proposals as either inspired genius or completely unworkable Things appear to be returning to normal,' said Harkor.

'Do not be deceived,' said Forrix. He could see the aggression building there. Words were sharper than usual. 'They are frustrated - their arguments could turn ugly.'

'There *is* tension here,' agreed Golg, 'but what of it? It is healthy. That is what this order is for.'

'Listen to Erasmus. What do you expect Forrix?' said Harkor. 'This campaign has cost us one fifth of our strength. Our brothers argue their case not to secure advancement, but to ensure our survival. They are bound to be a little headstrong.'

'There you are,' said Forrix. 'That is not normal. Look at them, bickering over their rules. It is distracting them from the true nature of the problem. Nothing will be normal until we are out of this subsector and fighting things that remain anchored in time.'

Harkor chuckled. 'Really, Forrix, a few minor setbacks with this xenos race and you start braying doom like a cheap soothsayer.'

Forrix rounded on Harkor. 'I don't call thirty thousand dead legionaries minor setbacks, brother.'

'There are more - there are always more,' replied Harkor dismissively. 'The supply fleet is due in from the Meretara Cluster soon. In the holds of its ships will be recruits from our holdings and home. Grist to the mill of war. The hrud are slippery, I agree, but even they must stand upon stone. When we take the metal to it and cut it away, they will fall like any other foe.'

Forrix turned his attention to an ongoing tactical simulation. Iron Warriors grand battalions assaulted a fixed installation in standard battle array: an encircling contravallation, field bastions for their artillery, brothers manning trenches and waiting for the call to assault.

'There are fifteen major hrud worlds in the Deeps, and eighty-four minor,' he said. 'Excluding those they have abandoned, we have taken three. Even you must see the numbers do not add up. We are several hundred thousand warriors short.'

The captain playing the hrud unexpectedly deployed a skirmishing unit behind a battery of Manticore missile launchers. They were swept from existence Before the action was over, an entire grand company of Iron Warriors had been removed from the table the wooden blocks representing them dropped without ceremony into a blackened steel box.

'And they're running, not fighting. What will happen, do you think, when we finally corner them?' said Forrix.

Golg grinned for reasons that eluded Forrix. He was a cold man, aloof from the Dodekatheon and every other organisation. His rank of captain while being elevated to the status of triarch had not endeared him to the higher warsmiths.

Harkor waved his hand. 'We are iron. We will not be blunted. These are—'

'Hush,' said Forrix.

Conversation in the hall died like a ripple of wind across grass. 'The primarch!' someone said.

'Perturabo is here!' called someone else.

Knots of Iron Warriors in the hall's aisle pulled themselves aside. Perturabo walked down between tables, trading nods with warriors that greeted him. The atmosphere of the hall changed. The Space Marines' spirits lifted as their lord rejoined them.

A chant rose, accompanied by the stamp of heavy boots on the deck plating.

'Iron within! Iron without! Iron within! Iron without!'

The chanting ceased when Perturabo came to a halt by his triarchs. The three warsmiths clashed their forearms on their armour.

'It is good to see you again, my lord,' said Forrix. His pleasure was tainted by worry; the primarch was drawn and tired-looking, but when he smiled at his sons in his awkward way, it was almost enough to put Forrix at ease.

'First captain. You have performed commendably,' said Perturabo. Forrix bowed his head in gratitude.

'We are bound for the gravipause?' Perturabo asked.

'Yes, my lord, I intended to hold there until we had your orders, and wait for the arrival of the resupply fleet.'

'A good place as well to stage an emergency warp jump,' said Perturabo. His smile changed in character. A feral edge came to it. Forrix answered carefully.

'An option I had not considered, my lord,' he lied. 'The campaign is not done.'

Harkor made a disparaging noise. Perturabo ignored it and looked around the room, his face open.

'Come, my warriors,' he said. 'Do not stop in your discussions! It is a sad day when the Dodekatheon is silent. I see industry here that should continue. Who will impress me by devising the best strategy against the hrud? Do not let my presence put you off.'

Slowly, conversation crept back out of the silence. With an initial animal furtiveness, it grew in volume and tempo until much in the hall was as it had been before the primarch's arrival.

Perturabo's smile dropped. 'When is the resupply fleet due?? he asked the triarchs.

'Soon, my lord,' said Harkor silkily. 'Five thousand new recruits at least, as well as new armoured units, new auxilia—'

'I am aware of what it brings,' interrupted Perturabo. 'What I do not know is when we will have it.'

Forrix cleared his throat. 'I expect it any day now. We shall know for certain soon. I have re-established astropathic communication with the sub-fleets in the surrounding systems. Longer range communication is still problematic, but our astropaths report the disturbances to real space are declining now that the hrud have departed. We should be able to make good contact soon, provided we remain in Gugann and do not venture on to other hrud-held systems.'

Perturabo nodded absent-mindedly, his great jaw working on nothing. The haunted look returned. 'We should consult. This campaign has to end.'

'As you desire, my lord,' said Golg.

Perturabo beckoned them to a hololithic chart desk being used as a battle simulator. The warsmiths there wordlessly deactivated their programmes and departed, leaving the display field dusty white Perturabo summoned an image into life.

'Display full cartoloithic view of Sak'trada Deeps. Overlay my cartographs, date stamp four-three-two.'

The table buzzed. A starscape blinked into life and out again, then stabilised, showing the isolated hundred stars of the Sak'trada Deeps. Black void circled it. The map was at such a scale that the nearest inhabited Imperial world was not visible. At the bottom a ragged double line of stars trailed from the cluster: the Vulpa Straits, so ineffectively held by Dantioch. Hrud inhabited systems were circled in red. Sinuous arrows came from the dozen stars at the formation's centre where most of the signified planets were located: the migration tracks of

the hrud.

'I have not been idle while I have been away from you, my sons, but have spent my time composing this map.' There was no explanation beyond that for his destabilising absence, and certainly no apology.

There never was from the Lord of Iron.

'We have provoked the hrud into a major migration. If it continues at this rate, then the Deeps will be empty of the xenos within six months. Although this will technically clear this area of the galaxy of these creatures, I cannot think it was what the Emperor desired when he gave us our orders.'

Golg smiled widely at Perturabo's flat jest. Harkor and Forrix remained stony-faced.

'Though Dantioch was craven in desire for withdrawal, and incompetent in his defence of the fortress worlds we had established in the straits, he was correct in one regard.' Perturabo pinched his fingers together then spread them wide within the projection. The hololith zoomed out smoothly. The Sak'trada Deeps became a single fuzzy ball of light, like a malformed star. The Orion-Cygnus arm, itself an isolated piece of the galaxy, shimmered and suddenly speckled with the blue-ringed signifiers of Imperial-held systems.

Projected tracks of the hrud migration painted themselves over the top.

'The nearest Imperial holding is twenty-three light years away,' said Perturabo, pointing at a star labelled as Haldos. 'From my observations of the hrud's unusual mode of transit, I calculate that they will hit the Cadomus and Haldos systems, and the worlds of Birgitta, Jonsdaim and Magna Aphrodite, inside a month. If they head further, they will come nigh to the Red Scar, and Sanguinius' home world of Baal.'

'Then let the angels deal with them,' said Golg.

Perturabo silenced him with a look. 'There are four main migratory routes that I have been able to plot. The other three will most likely head away into the outer rim of the Ultima Segmentum, where they will disperse and cause minimal damage to Imperial territory. However, our orders were to destroy them, and destroy them we shall.'

He gestured again. The table emitted a puff of static-scented gas and shifted its view.

'The Vulpa Straits. Large numbers of hrud have passed this way. According to Dantioch, unlike the ones we faced here, those hrud he encountered fought only if confronted, at least until the last days when they appeared in greater numbers. Even then, many appeared to be - if we can use the term for these beings - non-

combatants. They are using the straits to escape, probably for the same reasons I wished them to be held - they offer a stable route from the Deeps. If we were to block the migrant flocks' egress here, here and here…' Red bars blinked into existence, each labelled with the codename of a battlegroup. '…then they will be forced into the path of least resistance here.'

The Vulpa Straits blinked, and the representations of the hrud swarms funnelled themselves into that single corridor of space.

'We have no worlds there, thanks to Dantioch's incompetence. But that may work to our advantage. The hrud will not be expecting resistance.' Perturabo became animated. 'If we were to use a larger-scale version of the stasis traps we employed on—'

A trilling fanfare interrupted Perturabo's argument. The warsmiths looked around to find a nervous mortal officer walking hesitantly toward the primarch, a herald cherub flitting overhead.

'Why do you come in here?' demanded Harkor, moving round the table to confront the man. 'This place is forbidden to mortals.'

'I… I am sorry, my lord. I was ordered to come There is an urgent matter that demands the primarch's attention.'

'What matter?' Perturabo did not look at the man, occupied as he was by his war plan.

The officer swallowed nervously 'My lord, we have the resupply flotilla on an inward trajectory.'

'Why inform me of this information?' said the primarch tersely. 'Do I not have a Legion of experts to deal with such matters?' Harkor smiled unpleasantly at the mortal.

There was a long pause.

'We are struggling with communications and long-range auspex readings,' said the officer in a rush, 'but there appears to be only a single ship.'

Perturabo's attention was finally yanked from the table 'One ship?' His shadow fell across the shaking officer. His fists clenched, and the officer flinched.

'Yes, my lord.'

'Do you know which it is?'

'N-no, my lord.'

'Then find out!' the primarch growled. 'Now!'

Falling over his own feet, the officer fled the Dodekatheon. 'What now…' Perturabo said to himself. 'Brothers!' he shouted. The assembled warsmiths turned from their games and discussions. 'Within this table is my latest strategy.

Look over it. Test it to destruction. I want a workable plan to avoid a repetition of this debacle before I return. Trident, with me.'

Harkor, Forrix and Golg left the table and fell in with their lord. Perturabo desired to exercise his legs, as was his habit after his periods of seclusion - invariably, he worked intensely in those times and moved little from his drafting table. They avoided the crew trains running the length of the vessel and instead walked the miles to the command deck in silence. Once Harkor opened his mouth to say something but Perturabo silenced him with a threatening glare.

The officers of the command deck behaved like men condemned. Quiet orders issued from mouths tight with stress. Pale faces glowed with the sickly reflected light of gel screens. Eyes stole furtively to the Lord of Iron as he paced onto the deck, but none dared look at him for long. His fury boiled off him. His hunched body creaked with violence that the slightest mistake could unleash.

Perturabo went to stand by the empty shipmaster's throne. Its mechanisms had been opened and cleaned, awaiting its next occupant. No one knew yet who would be granted that dubious honour.

'Report,' said the primarch.

The officer of the watch nodded. The mortals on the deck moved cringingly under the guns of their Space Marine masters, and he was no different. He managed to look the primarch in the eye for half a second, delivering the rest of his news to a patch of floor at Perturabo's feet.

'It is the *Androcles*, my lord. They made contact a minute ago.'

'Where is the rest of the resupply fleet?'

The officer buckled under Perturabo's seething rage. 'My lord, *I*—

'Answer me!' bellowed Perturabo. He lowered his head to the officer's level, his spittle flecking the man's face. He was a monstrous bull, ready to charge. 'You have opened communications I assume?'

'Yes, my lord,' said the officer of the watch.

Perturabo looked around at his cowering servants. 'Then open me a hololith channel to her commander, immediately! What has happened to you? Have you all taken leave of your senses? Must I do everything myself?'

The officer shook. He had to swallow three times before he could continue speaking. 'My lord, Captain Thesuger is on his way here by fast lighter, running ahead of the *Androcles*. He has news that he wishes to deliver in person.'

'From the look of you,' said Perturabo to the deck, 'you are all aware of the information that the captain would impart. Report it to me.'

'My lord. I… I…' stuttered the captain.

Perturabo seized the officer of the watch by both shoulders and hauled him off his feet. 'Tell me!'

A dark stain spread across the officer's groin. Three drops of liquid splashed onto the floor.

'It is Olympia,' he said in a small, terrified voice. 'It has rebelled against the light of the Emperor.'

The expression on Perturabo's face would have been comical under any other circumstances. The colour drained from his flesh, his eyes widened to childlike proportions. His features went slack in disbelief. No one had ever seen the Lord of Iron so. All his certainties were washed away like footings of sand in a flood, and his arrogance collapsed like a castle built on top.

'I… I… am sorry, my lord,' said the officer.

Red flushed Perturabo's cheeks. His forehead blotched. His mouth twisted into a bestial snarl. With a roar, he gripped the officer of the watch. The man screamed as his shoulders shattered under the pressure. Keeping one hand on the man's shoulder, Perturabo grabbed his hip and lifted the hapless officer up high, raised his own leg and brought the man's back down hard on his armoured knee, breaking it like a stick.

He threw the dead man down and looked around wildly, as if he would see the solution to his predicament hiding in the corner. He fell into a crouch, the posture of a half-man about to strike. The bearing of a noble primarch left him, and the light of insanity danced behind his eyes.

The Iron Warriors hands tightened involuntarily on their guns. Golg took cautious steps back. Harkor looked over his shoulder for an avenue of escape. Forrix stood paralysed. Every man and woman on the command deck stopped dead, tasks forgotten. Only the servitors worked on, mindlessly burbling status reports or action queries.

Tension built unbearably, worse than an approaching storm. They were like meat beasts trapped in the cage of a raging ambull. Not one among them expected to leave alive.

Their looks of fear and the reactions of his sons cleared Perturabo's mind. For a moment, he considered flying into them and killing them all. The rational part of him that he had spent so many years cultivating teetered on the brink of destruction, but then recovered. He could not drown the shame this news brought in blood.

His rage passed, a thunderhead rolling away without delivering the promised rain. He sagged. The dead officer's terrified face stared up from the deck.

Perturabo stared back, lost for words. An awful, sucking ache pulsed in his chest, as if his hearts had been removed and replaced with nothingness.

Disbelief and shame threatened to destroy him. He screwed his eyes shut.

'Inform me when Captain Thesuger lands,' he said quietly. 'I will receive him in my command chamber alone.'

He turned to go, head bowed. He stopped and looked back at his communications officers.

'Tell him he has nothing to fear.'

THIRTEEN

OLYMPIA INVESTED

000.M31
OLYMPIA

The 125th Expeditionary Fleet came screaming out of the warp well within the system bounds of Olympia. Away from the safety of the Mandeville point, their arrival tore a hole in the fabric of space that would never properly heal. Tortured by the sudden imposition of the system's gravity fields, the heavy cruiser *Agamemnon* succumbed to the damage that had been inflicted by the hrud and detonated upon arrival, a brief supernova that signalled to the Olympians that the Lord of Iron had returned home.

A thousand legionaries were on board, yet Perturabo spared no glance for the bright flare of their death, ordering his fleet to make directly for Olympia without delay. His ships arrayed into a planetfall spearhead, the primarch returned home at full speed.

Forrix arrived upon the command deck to find his fellow triarchs already there. A host of warsmiths and captains had assembled around the pit of the hololith. The soft light of ersatz planet-shine bathed their faces. Darkness cloaked their backs thickly, and shadows they would never shake were at their heels.

Perturabo stood head and shoulders over the mightiest of his sons. Surrounded

by the dull steel of his Legion's war-plate, he was a lone mountain towering from a plain of iron skulls.

The command deck of a Space Marine warship was a noisy place. Officers, human and transhuman, gave orders. Vox reports came in from all over the vessel and from the fleet. Muttered data-streams issued from the biomechanical mouths of servitors. Machinery of every kind compressed the air with their quiet work songs: the whisper of coolant systems, the progressive chiming of system notifications, the whir of cogs and data-spools, the huffing of life support, the click of banks of indication lights. And presiding over it all, the key theme in the great melody of a starship's symphony, the distant throbbing of the engines that penetrated every atom of a man until the vibration became a part of his bones.

Over that was the sharper, more urgent humming of a hundred battleplate reactors crammed together. Virtually silent alone, their combined voices made a buzzsaw whine that settled uncomfortably around the teeth.

Forrix moved quietly to the front of the crowd. His brothers stepped grudgingly aside as they saw who tapped at their shoulders. Despite the noise, and the look of intense, almost insane concentration on Perturabo's face, the primarch sensed his approach and turned to look directly at him.

'You arrive, Forrix,' he said. 'How went the inspection?'

The grand hololith was dominated by a true-pict representation of Olympia and her attendant satellites. The remainder of the resupply fleet were in high anchor, broadsides turned planetwards. Despite the threat in its sky, the world turned lazily. Stepped ranks of mountain ranges dominated the surface, twisted by tectonic activity into fractured lines like formations of soldiers taking part in a complicated display drill. Basins cupped small green-blue seas. Thousands of lakes were trapped in the arrowheads of high valleys. Olympia was a naked world, its rocky skin showing sandy grey and brown, but it wore enough green to cover its modesty. Sparse forests shrouded mountain flanks. Emerald slashes were long valleys of fertile land.

White was the final predominate colour, evident in wisps of cloud curling around mountain ranges and spun into small storms by the thrusting landscape, and in the ice capping the highest peaks and the poles. Here and there were brownish stains in the sky over concentrations of industry, but it was not a ruined world, not yet.

Forrix looked upon it and felt profoundly sad: for what he had once been, for what he had become and for what his lord would ask him to do. Violence was the only possible outcome here Harkor and Golg stood either side of the

primarch. There was a space around them, as if they were surrounded by an invisible shield that kept the others back. Forrix stepped within this orbit, and he felt the tension emanating from his master.

'Seven grand battalions are prepared, as you requested, my lord,' said Forrix. They stand ready for deployment. All craft are assembled aboard the embarkation decks of the *Iron Blood*, *Grand Megera*, *Vengeance of Ptolos* and the *Ferric Tyrant*.

'Good,' said Perturabo. In the blue-green light of the simulated Olympia, the hollows of his face were shadowed black, making him appear cadaverous. A furious light burned in his blue eyes. Their coldness had become so intense it burned.

'What is the plan?' asked Forrix with great foreboding.

'You know what I am going to do, Forrix. I am going to teach them that no one defies Perturabo.'

'That you ask suggests you disagree with our lord's ruling, Forrix,' said Harkor snidely.

'I prefer not to make assumptions,' said Forrix, tired of his constant sniping.

Harkor wore his helmet, but Golg was bareheaded, and the greedy sneer on his face disturbed Forrix. Golg was of lower birth than Harkor or himself, and behaved so. What remembered slights did he hope to avenge?

Forrix checked himself before he looked back at the other officers to judge their mood. Any show of dissent would be punished brutally. Forrix had long been Perturabo's favourite; he had kept the position by knowing that he was not immune to his lord's temper.

For the first time in an age, Forrix was unsure. He put the metal to the stone where his lord commanded, no matter when or where. But the stone here was that of his home. The metal would sunder the flesh of his kin before it bit into its target. Perturabo was in a murderous rage. Forrix had no hope that the primarch would see sense and the bloodshed might be slight. He could try to reason with his lord, but that might well end with his own death. Forrix had no desire to die, though the thought did not unduly trouble him. He had been made a living weapon, and the Emperor used his tools hard. Forrix had resigned himself to dying a long time ago.

He did, however, have a choice in how he would end. Further complicating his feelings was the fact that, although the thought of attacking their home world sickened him, he could not, no matter how he hard he tried, convince himself that the primarch was wrong.

Data tags appended to the world and its orbitals swam around the display. Pre-action markers. There had never been any doubt that it would come to war. The sea of red data-screed - scrolling, blinking or frozen according to Perturabo's whim - settled it.

'Summon the master of the high watch,' ordered Perturabo.

A muted confirmation came from the communications array banking up the rear wall of the command deck. Olympia disappeared. An unhelmeted warrior appeared in its place He would have been waiting for the summons, probably ever since the fleet breached real space. His expression was studiously blank. In the striped light of hololith projection ribbons, he looked like a corpse.

'Captain Atrax,' said Perturabo stonily. 'Report.'

'My lord! said Atrax, 'I see Captain Thesuger succeeded in his mission and has brought you home. It is with great joy that I see you arrive here. The situation upon the planet's Efface is unfortunate, but now you have returned I believe it can be resolved swiftly. I— 'What happened?' interrupted Perturabo. 'Tell me in as few words as you can manage, captain.'

The captain blinked. '*Governor Dammekos died three months ago, my lord. Within weeks, the succession was disputed. Small-scale fighting broke out between some of the cities. When Captain Thesuger's fleet arrived to collect the recruits, there was no central authority to communicate with, and our demands for supplies were denied. I set the resupply fleet here to guard the system and sent Thesuger to fetch you. In the interim, I have received delegations from many of the factions. They are coalescing into a number of power blocks that—*'

Again, Perturabo interrupted. 'And you did nothing? There are five hundred Iron Warriors aboard the orbitals, the ships and upon the planet. You stood idle while all this went on?'

The primarch sounded reasonable. Everyone that heard his voice knew the tone for a lie The captain's hesitation was minute but telling. He stood straighten '*We threatened action, my lord. But we did not wish to act hastily. There is a large secessionist element on the planet, but their opposition is by no means unified. Only some wish to secede, but all of them demand change. If we had appeared to side with one faction over another, I calculated that the planet would slide rapidly into full-blown civil war. We have blockaded Olympia, and the orbitals remain in our hands*! You judge this sufficient discharge of your duties?'

'*I… Yes, my lord, I do. This is not some minor acquisition, but our home world. I judged it best to proceed with caution.* '

'Caution?' said Perturabo. The Imperium was not won by caution, Captain

Atrax. You have performed poorly. You are to relinquish command immediately to your lieutenants and report to me aboard the *Iron Blood*!

Atrax's face remained blank. 'As *you command*, *my lord'*.

Forrix doubted very much that Atrax would survive the encounter. 'Show me Olympia again,', commanded Perturabo. Atrax disappeared. Frequency tether bulbs pulsed off. The projection ribbons whooped and Olympia again hung serenely in the false void conjured by the hololith.

For long moments Perturabo stared at his adopted world. When he turned to look at Forrix, the primarch's decision was written across his face.

'Triarch Forrix, send word to the cities of our home world. We will meet them in parlay, under the flag of Eirene.' Perturabo passed a scroll to Forrix before returning his gaze to the hololithic representation of Olympia. 'These are my instructions. See they are carried out to the letter.'

'As you command, my lord,' said Forrix. His hearts were sick with misgiving, but he was wise enough to keep that to himself.

Within sight of Kardis stood the great peak of the Adarine. Other mountains exceeded it in height, but few did in beauty. The Adarine's head was close to a perfect pyramid; three sheer sides of grey rock lined with delicate strata picked out in ice and snow were set above broad shoulders covered in dense, fragrant pine forest They called the peak 'the Old Man', for it looked like an elder swathed in a heavy cloak of green.

Upon the Adarine's shoulders, Perturabo set his camp. His engineers felled a patch of forest, removing the thin soil and levelling a two-hundred-metre circle of the ground to within a millimetre of perfect flatness. Curious mountain dwellers - the herders and hunters of the forest - were drawn by the towers of smoke roaring upwards from the Iron Warriors' fusion cutters and rock saws. The Legion ignored them. Perturabo ordered steps cut into the mountainside leading down to the highway over two thousand metres below. This was the great road of Pellekontia, the same road he had taken to Kardis many years ago when he had set out on his quest to unite the world.

His crusade had been idealistic, foolish, a waste of time. These were the thoughts of the primarch as he watched his siege masters at work and remembered those days, for a great and potent rancour had flooded his being.

Perturabo had a large pavilion of iron-grey silk erected by his men, its central adamantine pole as tall as a mast and mighty enough to resist the winds that coursed periodically from the mountain's peak. The floor was polished to an ice-slick finish and covered in washed white sand, and the pavilion had been

furnished as the lords of Olympia would expect, though the primarch made it clear there were to be no chairs within. The work was simple graft for the Iron Warriors and took less than a day.

Before the sun began to sink, heralds from the nearest cities had already arrived to speak with the primarch. He stood in full view so that they might see him, but all were turned away from the top of the steps leading to the camp. Perturabo set no walls about the site or defences of any kind. This alone was enough to warn the wise of what was to come; a few of the emissaries returned home swiftly.

That night, the camp was sombre. Few lights burned. No speech or song was heard by the onlookers peering at it from the woods or encamped impatiently at the head of the stairs. Halfway to the highway, a second camp was set, where the warriors and attendants of the emissaries were told to wait. The ambassadors themselves remained at the top, lest Perturabo admit the delegation suddenly.

At dawn, First Captain Forrix came out to the representatives. Others had joined the group in the course of the night, wearing their badges and city colours proudly. None of those things had meant more than civic pride when Forrix had first left his home world; now they were markers of belligerence.

How quickly things had changed.

Stiff-limbed, the emissaries got to their feet as the steel-clad giant approached them. The pair of sentries, motionless as statues through the night, turned about and stamped their feet, marching away in lockstep. Forrix waited at the stair head, the rising sun turning his plain armour the colour of molten bronze. He surveyed the gathered mortals and their varied expressions of fear, awe and ill-temper.

Perturabo could have voxed the message he was about to deliver planetwide, but Forrix's master understood the value of theatre.

'I am Warsmith Forrix, first captain and triarch. I bring you words from my primarch, the Lord of Iron.' He swept his gaze over them all, a threat that they listen properly. 'The primarch will speak with your masters. Go to them. Inform them that he summons them all under the strict peace of Eirene that governs the lords of every city on Olympia. If your masters are like the tyrants of old, they will be craven creatures, preferring to use others to safeguard themselves. Know this - if they do not come personally, the primarch will be… *displeased*, so I advise you to choose your speakers wisely. You have half a day to bring them here.'

The emissaries waited. None wished to be the first to leave. An unctuous little man with the forked beard of a Vedric came forwards. He had little muscle, a

contemptible specimen brought up in a world of plenty. Truly, these people did not understand what they had unleashed.

'Most of us here are designated speakers, with full power to negotiate on our city's behalf. All those he needs to speak with are already present. Why the delay?' asked the man with the polished, equable tones of a professional diplomat.

Forrix hated the man at first sight. He found it shameful that they shared a common origin. This man had no honour, no warrior's spirit. He was a viper. Men like him had knowingly led Olympia away from the truth and back to petty wars. His ilk thrived on intrigue, while warriors bled at their behest.

'Because you are not good enough,' said Forrix.

'If we might speak with the primarch now, it would save much effort later,' insisted the man.

'You cannot see him,' said Forrix simply, and turned his back on them. His leaving unstoppered the mouths of the rest, and they erupted with questions as he strode back towards the pavilion.

The voices of the emissaries became more strident as he moved further from them, but not one of them dared leave the safety of the steps and tread upon the platform, even though there were no sentries in sight to stop them - more evidence of their cowardice.

How low the mighty of Olympia have sunk, Forrix thought, *to abandon not only wisdom but courage alongside it*.

All the worst things had returned, none of the good.

They deserved to die.

The half-day passed. The cities complied, sending their nobles to the parlay. After they had arrived, Perturabo made the high men and women wait outside his pavilion for most of the day before he told his Tyranthikos veterans to allow them in. The heights of the Adarine were cold even in summer, but the air was thin and the sun strong. Despite the chill of the mountain, skin burned easily under its rays.

The nobles filed in, haughty in their bearing as if they could not see that they stared death in the face. Of course none of the tyrants or minor city princelings had come themselves.

How dare their messengers be so calm, *so assured*, thought Perturabo. *They should be crawling on their bellies and begging for mercy*.

They had with them heralds who announced them in ringing voices: Ptolemaides, Damek, Krastonfor, Falk, Arestain and a score of other noble

names. At the front came the representatives of the bloodlines from whose ranks the tyrants had historically been drawn. Perturabo could see the family resemblance in these minor sons and daughters, the sneering superiority that they could not hide nor would ever have thought to. He had bested the armies of their ancestors, he had trailed footprints in their blood through the high palaces of their cities, but still they were too proud to be afraid. They looked around the sandy floor of the pavilion for seats. Finding none, their arrogance was seasoned with outrage, leaving the primarch struggling between laughter and violence.

He calmed himself. Now was not the time.

Perturabo alone had a place to sit, upon his great throne brought down from the *Iron Blood*. He would replace it, he decided. The style was Olympian, and he had little love for such artefacts now.

The emissaries arrayed themselves in front of the Lord of Iron. A few exchanged sharp words over their relative positioning. Around half of them wore red bands around their right arms, a smaller number blue A handful wore no ribbon.

Factions, *then*.

Perturabo matched the names and faces with the cities. It appeared the planet had split along the lines of the old Achaen Hexopolis and the Penthuik League, the two groupings that had opposed his unification of Olympia a century and a half ago. Predictable, and a harbinger of further fragmentation. Before long it would be city state against city state again. Perturabo was leadenly tired of it all.

'You have chosen one to speak for all?' said Perturabo. He was hidden in the gloom at the back of the tent. The hole around the anchoring ring of the pavilion let in a band of sunlight divided by the shadows of ropes. This solitary light was so bright that the rest of the space was cast into near darkness.

A woman stepped forwards.

'Dematea of Achos!' her herald announced. Perturabo did not recognise her. She had not been born the last time Perturabo had been upon Olympia.

'Primarch Perturabo!' she declaimed. 'We of the Achaen Hexopolis petition you to join with us and put down these Penthuik dogs that we might have peace again.'

'You look like yourgreat-great-great-grandmother,' said Perturabo quietly.

The statement wrong-footed the woman. Her bearing was proud, but not proud enough to hide fear, and nor could it conceal her confusion.

'She was a clever woman,' continued Perturabo. 'When I approached the gates of Achos with the men of Lochos and the Iron Band, she threw open her gates

and welcomed me. Your city stands today thanks to her wisdom. I do not detect the same thoughtfulness in you.' He looked over the others. 'And you of the red ribbons. The Penthuik League?' He snorted. 'You resurrect that pathetic group? Why do you come to me? Doubtless you also will ask for my support in seceding from the Imperium of Man.'

Didimus Diogoras, the spokesman of the Penthuik party, seized his chance. 'We ask no such thing. We ask only to be left alone. The Imperium bleeds us dry.'

'Traitors,' said Dematea.

'Perhaps were it not for the machinations of the Achaens, we would not be in this woeful situation!' retorted Didimus.

'*We* are loyal!' said Dematea.

'Our grievances are the same,' said Didimus.

'Our aims are not.'

'And you of no ribbons?' said Perturabo. He spoke mildly. The emissaries would see no danger in his mood, but his sons did.

'We are proud to stand alone,' said one of them, misinterpreting Perturabo's equanimity as genuine.

'My lord, if we may begin our negotiations. There are several grievances we would put to you,' said Dematea. 'Once those are resolved, we of the blue ribbons will return home.'

'The grievances we can agree on,' said Didimus. 'The resumption of Imperial rule we cannot. We of the Penthuik League demand our planet back.'

'Do not listen to him, my lord. The Achaen Hexopolis wish for speedy re-establishment of proper authority, if only we can discuss the heavy burdens of recruitment upon our people,' said Dematea.

It was plain enough that she despised Didimus, and wished to hurry through the talks to be away from him.

'And what about your demands we cede the Ischian peninsula to your puppets in Doros? You protest loyalty, while using it as a cloak to seize our rightful lands,' said Didimus.

'Lies!' said Dematea.

They began to argue, shouting at one another, forgetting that they were in the presence of a demigod. Perturabo's irritation swelled.

'This is not a negotiation,' he said quietly. The argument continued, drawing in more of the delegation.

His temper broke, cresting suddenly as a wave. He slammed his hand into the arm of his chair. The clash of metal did not halt their bickering either.

'This is not a negotiation!' he shouted. They fell silent. 'This is not your chance to petition me, or instruct me in your meaningless squabbles!' He sat forwards in his throne, bringing his face into the brightness of the sun. The shadows cast on its features made it a crag as hard as any mountain's. His voice was slow and forceful, building to a shout again. 'All my life, your people used me, told me what to do, until my *true* father came You forget the new order. The Tyrant of Lochos was made planetary governor. You should have honoured the succession when Dammekos died.'

'We are not opposed to the Imperium,' said Dematea. 'We are loyal to the ideal, just not the execution.'

'The new order? Submit ourselves to hereditary tyranny of the entire planet to make your task in subjugating our spirit easier?' said Didimus incredulously. 'No more! We remove ourselves from your Imperium. Your new order has done no good to Olympia.'

'No good, you say?' said Perturabo. He lifted up his hand in a gesture of reasonableness. 'Unity. Peace. New technologies. A life of ease free from war and outside threat. Without me, every mother on this planet would still be praying that the Black Judges choose not to visit during her children's lifetimes. What have you lost?

'Your ability to make war on each other? The chance for one family in each city to set themselves over every other citizen? Your accounting of the truth is poor.'

'My lord, you relieved us of one terror only to replace it with one greater!' protested Didimus. 'Where once dozens were taken every century, now thousands are recruited every year.'

Perturabo's eyes narrowed. His metal throne creaked under the strength of his grip.

'We lose our children to you,' said Dematea. 'You have taken them, changed them and led them to their deaths on foreign spheres. To those who oppose you, you and your Emperor seem no better than the Black Judges, and the numbers you take exceed those the ancient lords of the Meretara Cluster stole by far.'

'Lies!' snapped Perturabo. 'Your sons are heroes, not feedstock.'

'Then show us that is so,' said Dematea. 'Give us the word of your Emperor that he values their sacrifice.'

A hot shiver of anger passed over the primarch's skin. 'Do not use his name against me,' said Perturabo with quiet menace.

'What of our grievances?' said Didimus. 'The political situation needs to be addressed. If we are to reconsider remaining as part of this polity, then our

situation must change!'

Perturabo turned to him with a rictus smile. 'What of your grievances? Do you believe them to be relevant, truly?' He affected the sarcastic amity of a victorious despot. It was a role he had played before, and one that these men before him understood. He pretended it was necessary, and that he did not perform the role simply for the joy of it.

'You will consider our requests then?'

Perturabo's false smile froze and fell away. 'Do you not see? Did you think Olympia is special somehow because I was found here? This world is like any other that has refused the light of the Emperor's protection. It is non-compliant, and shall suffer the wrath of our Legion as a non-compliant world.'

He stood over the men and women.

'You have not been on the front of the Great Crusade. You have not witnessed the worlds I have burned, the cultures I have extirpated, the xenos breeds I have consigned to extinction. If you had seen but one of the horrors waiting out there in the void, you would offer up your children without complaint. All that blood was spilt with one purpose - to safeguard mankind. Every human world, some of surpassing beauty and with cultures better than Olympia's, that said no to the Emperor's offer was destroyed. Why? To protect the greater bulk of mankind. You are rich with folly to think this slight could go unanswered. This is rebellion, no less, and will be answered as such.'

'It is a negotiation!' spluttered Didimus. 'An arbitration, called under the ancient tenets of Eirene, and you threaten us with violence?'

'You speak of peace?' said Perturabo furiously. 'You had peace, and you have turned your back on it. I judged you the moment I heard of your treachery, and I found you guilty.' He took a step forwards, frightening the emissaries back. 'There can be no negotiation with traitors.'

He laughed. A nervous note made it warble madly. The reasonable nature that had once ruled his heart watched in alarm as this pantomime unfolded, but it was powerless to stop the events' progression. Perturabo doubted he would have stopped it even if he could. For days he had debated what he should do, sliding inexorably toward die path of blood. Now his feet were set upon it, it was almost a relief to follow it to its natural conclusion.

'See!'

Perturabo nodded at his Dominators. With inactive power fists, they pulled heavy golden cords. Knots all along the wall tops untied and the skirts of the pavilion tent dropped to the floor, leaving the bell standing. Cold wind blew in,

making the sand of the floor skitter away. Perturabo pointed eastwards towards Kardis. Its black fortifications dominated the horizon. The deep deft of the Kardikron pass faced them, showing its ranks of walls as a reptile splays its niffs in threat.

'Before my conquest of Kardis, its walls were deemed unbreakable Not one enemy had succeeded in overthrowing them in over a thousand years, not until I brought them down. I rebuilt them to a better plan. Against any ground force they would be unbreakable save by me I will not conquer this city as I once did. I will not break its walls, or kill its people with my warriors.'

There were looks of relief of the faces of some Others were more cautious.

'What will you dot asked Eugon Ptolemiades, whose city Kardis was.

'I will destroy it. Utterly. I will annihilate Kardis. It was the site of my first victory in the unification of Olympia. It shall be the beginning of its punishment.' He settled back into his throne. 'Let fire herald the return of the Lord of Iron.'

'No! Please my lord, I beg you,' said Ptolemiades.

'You cannot—' began Dematea.

Perturabo closed his fist.

Blazing spears of light stabbed down from the ships in orbit. Lance strikes ionised the atmosphere and sent thunderclaps of heat-shocked air across the mountains. They slammed into the near invisible void bubble covering Kardis. Unearthly growling echoed from the faces of Olympia's stem mountains as it collapsed.

The shrieking whine of incoming heavy ordnance made conversation impossible. Giant shells fell from the sky, burning white with the heat of re-entry. They left smoking contrails that crossed one another in gentle curves, and then, in a fury of fire and roaring destruction, they levelled Kardis.

The sky blazed. The emissaries threw up their hands against the light and cried out.

An atomic bloom billowed from the city. Wind howled outwards, blowing the tent away and battering the emissaries down to their knees. Fire blasted out in every direction, setting the forests of the mountains alight and turning farmland in the valleys to poison ash.

'I fought long and hard to find enough fissile elements to make the weapons that originally brought this world to its senses,' shouted Perturabo over the moaning, hot death-wind blowing from Kardis. 'Thanks to the Emperor and the priests of Mars, I have better weapons now, engines of destruction that you

cannot imagine.' The cap of the atomic cloud spread outwards, the pillar of steam and dust it rested on so thick it appeared solid. 'You will not be given the chance to learn.'

The wind dropped, its force decreasing with unnatural smoothness to a warm breeze. Where Kardis had once stood there now blazed a firestorm haemorrhaging black smoke under a dispersing nuclear cloud.

'The fate of Olympia will be decimation, as I enacted upon my Legion when I found it wanting. So shall it be here!' He closed his eyes. He did not care to hide his pain.

'You will kill one in every ten of us?' said Dematea.

'You will do it yourselves,' replied Perturabo.

'You will never succeed in convincing our people to turn on each other,' she said.

'I do not expect to,' said Perturabo. His neck was stiff. He rolled his head, and the input cables burrowed into his scalp rattled. 'Those that comply will be spared, those that do not will be exterminated or enslaved. If you will not serve this Legion and the Emperor as free men, then you shall serve me in chains. As many worlds have learnt, such is the cost of non-compliance.'

Iron Warriors trooped around the group, encircling them in gleaming ceramite. Ash clouds spreading from the ruins of Kardis had turned the day dark and cold.

'Eirene! We came here under the flag of Eirene!' shouted Didimus.

'Your customs mean nothing to me They never have Here begins the lesson that Olympia must learn. Loyalty is the only virtue I value If you have no loyalty, you are worthless.'

He raised his hand.

'We are loyal,' said Dematea in a rising panic 'We do not wish to leave the Imperium. You misunderstand!'

'I understand perfectly. You wish to change your relationship to it. The Imperium is the will of the Emperor. His will is hard as iron. It is not amenable to alteration unless heated and beaten upon. Your limp requests have no appeal. You are all traitors. The question is of absolutes, not degree. Your men will die. You shall die. Your cities shall die Kardis is but the first, and before I am done all Olympia will throw itself to its knees and beg for forgiveness.'

He turned from his captives to his warriors.

'Kill them all,' he ordered. 'Leave none alive but do not spoil the heads. Send those back to their cities. These creatures have one last message to deliver.'

The emissaries tried to run. Perturabo watched as they were shot down and their

blood soaked into the sand blowing away from the mountain.

Perturabo had the Cavea Ferrum installed beneath the smoking ruins of Kardis, his labyrinthine lair of iron halls and subtle energy fields that could misdirect any intruder. From there, he directed the devastation of his adopted home No quarter was given. After Kardis, none was expected. The depleted armies of Olympia tried everything against their estranged sons, from outright assault to full surrender. None of them were successful. They were cut down where they stood.

Brutalised by decades of inglorious war, feeling abandoned and undervalued, the treachery of their own people was one burden too much for the Iron Warriors to bear. Without mercy or conscience, the Legion slaughtered its way across the planet. There were exceptions - individual legionaries or small formations who refused to enact the primarch's will. They were treated as harshly as the civilian populace.

Phoros, Iskia, Vren and Achos fell in quick succession on the first two days. Each city was cast down. At first Perturabo took them slowly, letting the fear of his vengeance build across the planet. As his campaign progressed, the pace of conquest accelerated. Several cities fell every day as Perturabo split his Legion, sending individual grand companies to every quarter of the world. Contests were made of the speed and ingenuity with which each city could be overthrown. It became a grim celebration of the martial arts among the Lord of Iron's sons. First a city's walls were shattered by massive bombardment, then the breaches stormed by Iron Warriors, and so it was repeated again and again.

Perturabo had fashioned the defences of the principal cities. These proved the greatest challenges and individual warsmiths fought over the honour of their reduction. The rest, ringed with antiquated stone walls dating from the days of the tyrants, were taken in a matter of hours. As he promised, Perturabo gave the option to cities to execute a tenth of their populations. Few acquiesced to begin with, not until they heard the Iron Warriors were exterminating more than half of the people and enslaving any who survived.

Hesitantly, parts of Olympia responded, sacrificing one tenth of its people to the Lord of Iron.

Funeral pyres hundreds of metres high were erected outside each ruined city, the mounded bodies set afire with plasma bombs. They burned for days. Wailing chains of slaves were herded into mass-transit lifters and hauled into orbit.

There were holdouts. The eyes of those Olympians who did not surrender turned skywards nervously to the fleet, but the iron stars Perturabo had set over

their world kept their silence Perturabo had determined to reduce each city in the time honoured way; by blood, metal and stone.

He saved Lochos for last.

FOURTEEN

THE FALL OF LOCHOS

000.M31
LOCHOS, OLYMPIA

Lochos was unassailable from three sides. Only to the north east, where the mountain the city dominated was joined to its sister peaks by a long, humpbacked stretch of bare rock, was it vulnerable, and then only just. This was the Kephalon Ridge.

The ascension road to the south of the city had been blown. Fresh cliffs of pale bedrock scarred the mountain there. Never in Lochos' history had so drastic an action been undertaken. To repair the ascension road might prove an impossible task; it would certainly be ruinously expensive In destroying its link to the outside world, Lochos had all but admitted it was doomed.

The triarchs stood some way away from the Lord of Iron. His mood had become blacker as the reconquest progressed, and he brooked no company but his own. Awaiting his orders, but commanded away from his presence, the triarchs were stranded in the space between action and inaction. Behind them loomed the giant guns of the Stor-Bezashk. To the fore was the ruined valley of Arcandia; on the other side, the city and its last remaining approach of the Kephalon Ridge.

'They are dead, and they know it,' said Golg. His superior smile had become fixed onto his face in recent days, as if burned into his skin.

'Their defiance is admirable,' said Harkor, 'but meaningless.'

'What would you do in their position?' asked Forrix. 'Murder your own children?'

Harkor smirked and turned to the other triarch. 'Golg, I do not think Forrix has yet come to terms with this war.'

Forrix left the barb unanswered. 'They have a strong position. They do not need to give up.'

'They cannot win,' said Harkor.

'They will make us bleed for our victory,' said Forrix. 'They know it, we know it.'

'That will not stop the assault,' said Harkor.

Forrix's gaze drifted across the long, deadly ground of the ridge. It resembled the sloping back of a monstrous saurian. At either end, the ridge swelled outwards in a series of rounded bluffs separated by nearly vertical short valleys. At these points, the way to Lochos was several hundred metres across, although to either side the slope quickly became difficult, with bare, treacherous rock dropping suddenly into precipices.

In the middle, the ridge was a knife edge a dozen metres across. A narrow road ran along the ridge full length. In ancient times, it had broken into a series of drover's tracks that led onto the mountain slopes, for the ridge away from Lochos had ended in a glen walled by high cliff's that went nowhere A tunnel had been carved through almost five kilometres of mountain under Perturabo's supervision after his wars were done, leading out towards the Delepon valley and the way there to Kardis.

The ridge had been phenomenally fortified even before Perturabo had set his artful mind to its improvement. Since the days of the Hammer of Olympia, gatehouses of sloping seamless metal had guarded each end - howdahs on the back of the saurian. The rock either side of the road had been smoothed to minor finish, giving no purchase to the feet of would-be attackers. The middle of the ridge had been broken through, creating an artificial chasm one hundred and fifty metres deep. It was crossable only by a drawbridge, and that had been cast down by the defenders of Lochos and lay bent sue hundred metres beneath the foundations of the towers.

Golg began pacing back and forth. Forrix drifted forward towards the edge of the cliff, wishing to be away from Harkor. Legend had it that it was close to their

current position that Perturabo had been found and granted his first sight of Lochos. What a different view he must have had then. The mountain had been mutilated: the fertile valley of Arcandia smouldered, the hamlets and the small towns along its length smoking still, and the dams were all broken. Where their waters had been were the only clean spaces in the valley. Everything else was black and ruined. Corpse smoke fouled the air.

Perturabo stood some way off from his triarchs, framed by the tendrils of smoke rising from all over Olympia. By their position, Forrix knew the cities, but his brain was numbed by the slaughter, and when he tried to recall their names they swam away from his mind, like fish evading capture.

There used to be fish in the mountain streams near his home, he suddenly remembered. He had not thought of that for over a century. The clarity of the memory took him aback: small blue fish in the clear water.

Perturabo spoke loudly, bringing him back to the present with a start.

'Toramino, bring it down,' said Perturabo into his vox pick-up.

The guns of the Stor-Bezashk boomed in rippled sequence. A thousand shells hurtled skywards, arcing over the blackened valley of Arcandia to the walls of Lochos. Brilliant flashes preceded rolling clouds of fire. Pillars of stone dust erupted from the base of the walls, clouding the air. Only then did the noise of the impact roll out across the valley.

Again the guns fired, then again, hurling thousands of tonnes of high explosive ordnance at the city walls.

Harkor came up behind Forrix. The first captain felt he would never be free of him.

'The walls are holding well,' said Forrix emotionlessly. He was speaking only because he felt something should be said.

'Of course. These walls were built by our lord himself,' said Harkor. 'It is an interesting exercise seeing our craft of destruction set against our craft of fortification. No fortress can stand forever, but it shall be a lesson to see how long before the walls collapse.' Forrix glanced at their master. Perturabo said nothing.

The primarch watched his former home suffer the bombardment. The walls burst outwards, rumbling down the sides of the mountain in avalanches of shattered blocks. Weaponry exploded inside the bastions housing them. Rarely had Forrix seen such a display, but it left him feeling empty inside. Soon the city was afire, and the walls crumbled. Only the Kephalon Ridge was left untouched.

Already, the grand battalions tasked with the ridge's assault were assembling in

the corrie.

Unthinkingly, Forrix spoke his innermost thoughts aloud. 'Such a waste of men, tearing down the city by hand. We should level it from space.'

Harkor chuckled and rested a hand on Forrix's pauldron. Forrix tensed in his armour. 'The Lord of Iron makes a point. What he raises up, he can bring down.'

Forrix gave Harkor a thin-eyed stare.

'It is a lesson you should remember, brother,' said Harkor.

To a signal neither of them heard, the assault force on the far side of the valley surged forwards. Their battle cries were diminished by distance, becoming pathetic sounding. Sunlight winked from polished armour. Seconds later, explosions followed.

Forrix shrugged Harkor off and strode towards Perturabo purposefully. He'd be damned if he was going to stand around while Lochos fell. He was desperate to shake away his melancholy with action.

The day was going to be long whatever happened, and the night that followed never-ending.

Fire and screams and smoke.

Those were the constants in the equation of Fortreidon's life, and their sum was death.

Lochos was ablaze. Civilians ran madly from their rampaging sons. The Iron Warriors slaughtered everyone they came across. People flung themselves down, begging for life. They sought mercy, trusting to the bonds of kith and kin to stay the avenging hand of the Legiones Astartes. They found none. Even though Lochos was a city of old men, the genetically unsuitable, children and women, the Iron Warriors treated them all with the same ruthlessness.

People were selected at random, lined up against walls and blown to pieces by volleys of mass-reactive fire. Homes were torched while their inhabitants cowered inside. Fortreidon hesitated before every shot, and was relieved when his target scrambled out of sight or was slain by another warrior. Shamefully, he stopped shooting, waiting for Zankator or Fan to finish the deed for him.

They worked their way into a square, away from the richer environs of the inner city, where the houses were small but well built. No matter their relative wealth or construction, they burned just as well.

They reached the first house.

'Fortreidon, Kellephon. Torch this one, move on,' said Sergeant Zhalsk.

Fortreidon shattered the door with one blow from his armoured boot. Kellephon moved forwards briskly, his training kicking in, even though he fought

defenceless townsfolk rather than deadly xenos. At the threshold he raised his flamer, then lowered it and looked within.

'Get on with it!' said Zhalsk.

Fortreidon went to Kellephon's side to cover the modest room with his bolter. Possessions were scattered around the single room of the ground floor. It looked like breakfast preparations had begun when the attack started, and the inhabitants had fled. There, in three pieces, was a clay psomi board, the flour to make the bread spilt over the floor. A doll lay face down on the rush matting. For all the vaunted promises of the Imperium, the lives of these people had not improved much.

Seeing nothing inside, Fortreidon asked, 'Why do you hesitate, brother?'

'I grew up in a place like this,' said Kellephon quietly.

The pilot light of Kellephon's flamer hissed. A savage twist snuffed it out, and he lowered his weapon's barrel to the floor.

'I will not do it,' he said.

'What?' said Zhalsk, his voice grating and powerful through his vox grille.

'This is not right,' said Kellephon. 'These people are not our enemies.'

'Get on with it,' said Zhalsk grimly. 'Our orders are to kill everyone, no survivors. An example is to be made.'

'I will not,' said Kellephon. 'We have made enough of an example This has to stop. Now.'

'Get a move on, brother!' ordered Zhalsk.

'No,' repeated Kellephon. Slowly, so that none could mistake his actions as impulsive he cast his weapon aside.

The squad hesitated. Brother looked to brother.

'He is right. This is wrong,' said Bardan.

'You think so?' said Zankator. He was tense spoiling for a fight.

He put down his bolter and drew his knife, his murderous instincts coming to the fore at the last. Zankator did not like easy deaths.

'What are you doing?' said Zhalsk. Something like panic was in his voice.

'I agree with Kellephon,' said Dentrophor. He went to stand with his brother.

'Do you think for a moment that the primarch, having ordered the destruction of his own city, will thank you? You doom us all!' said Zhalsk.

'This never was his home,' said Kellephon. 'We all pretended it was, even though he said again and again that it was not. But it was my home. The Legion has changed. This is not the way we are. Where is our mercy? Look to Fortreidon. Do we want him to grow into his iron, thinking this is what we are -

callous monsters? From honour cometh iron!' Kellephon held up his hand and swept it around him. Screaming citizens came to the entry of the street, saw the Iron Warriors and fled. 'Where is the honour in this?'

'The primarch has ordered it, so let it be done,' said Zhalsk. 'His word is our command. Obey, or die.'

But the sergeant did not bring his bolter to bear.

'I hear the hesitation in you, Zhalsk,' said Kellephon. 'Where are you from? Irex? Do you know what the Twenty-Eighth Grand Battalion did to Irex?'

'It does not matter!' said Zankator. 'None of it matters! This isn't about Olympia or the Emperor. It is about honour. By turning its back on us, Olympia shames us. The people of our world must be punished. If we do not it, where will our honour be? Where our strength? We will be a laughing stock.'

'Better that than monsters,' replied Kellephon. 'What are we, Curze's murderers?'

'Listen to Zankator,' said Zhalsk. 'Move on. Forget this ever happened. We have orders. Perturabo will rebuild here Olympia will live.'

'How can you say that when the black smoke of corpse pyres smother the sun?' said Kellephon.

Fortreidon looked around. Like Udermais, he was undecided, unattached from either of the two inimical groups taking shape in the squad.

'It is reasonable to have doubts, brother,' said Zhalsk. 'But that is all this is.'

'I think it has gone beyond that,' said Zankator with relish. 'Our flame-handed warrior here has crossed a line. He has become a traitor to our lord.'

The word 'traitor' seemed to still the turbulent air of the city, drowning out the chaos of the sacking.

'He is as much of a traitor as the people of this city,' continued Zankator, moving forwards, knife ready.

'What are you doing?' said Zhalsk.

'What needs to be done,' said Zankator. With those words, he charged, crashing into Kellephon as he was drawing his bolt pistol 'Stop!' shouted Zhalsk. 'I order it!'

'You are not fit to give orders.' Dentrophor opened fire, felling Zhalsk before he could react. Fan shot back, riddling Dentrophor's breastplate with smoking holes. He danced spastically as the mass-reactive bolts destroyed his body inside his armour, dousing them all in sprays of his blood. Bardan was on Fan then, smashing his bolter out of his hands and stabbing hard with his combat knife.

Fan twisted aside. Metal scraped on metal as the knife gouged a long scratch in

his ceramite armour.

'Stop! Stop!' shouted Udermais in despair. He backed away as his brothers hacked each other down. He made a grab of Bardan to pull him back, dien Fan, but they were half-hearted attempts, slowed by the knowledge that to arrest one was to take sides and doom the other.

Fortreidon had his gun up, wavering between the two battling pairs of Iron Warriors.

Zankator had Kellephon against the wall and was stabbing madly at his joints, trying to pierce the articulated metal and arming suit beneath Kellephon jammed the heel of his hand tinder the visor of Zankator's helmet, forring it backwards. The two of them were locked together in a deadly impasse, neither of them able to break the other. Zankator grunted as he tried to bring his head back down.

Fortreidon looked from one to the other. The reek of smoke and blood seeping through his helmet's grille had him breathing hard.

Perturabo had ordered this, the Hammer of Olympia living up to his name one final time. Fonreidon remembered when he was recruited, the chime of acceptance from the testing equipment proving that he was worthy. He remembered his mother's tears and the weeping of women as yet more sons were taken from their homes. He remembered growing up without brothers, without his father.

He remembered… He remembered… *pride*, lie remembered when he donned his battleplate for the first time and felt the honour of serving his primarch. He remembered the might given to him as he fought and bested creatures from the depths of nightmare. That was the future he had been promised, and it had been delivered to him by Perturabo.

He strode forwards, suddenly angry. Men like Kellephon would take that away, and leave humanity weak and divided. He raised his bolter and jammed it into the side of Kellephon's helm.

Zankator laughed horribly. 'Kellephon, you always were weak.'

Kellephon did not relent in his grip. 'What are you doing, boy? Can you not see? This is not our way!'

Fortreidon pressed the bolter harder into the side of Kellephon's helmet.

'Iron within, iron without,' said Fortreidon, and fired.

Kellephon's body hit the ground with a flat clang. Zankator kicked it.

Bardan was badly wounded. Fan was dead, Ildermais stood alone, seemingly in shock.

'Do not think I will forget this, Udermais,' said Zankator.

'What about Bardan?' said Fortreidon. His head was swimming, and there was a buzzing in his ears.

'Leave him. If he lives, the Lord of Iron will deal with him.' Zankator sheathed his blade and retrieved his bolter. 'We have a city to burn.'

FIFTEEN

IRON WITHOUT

000.M31
LOCHOS, OLYMPIA

For the last time, Perturabo returned home.

The Palace of Lochos lay open to him. The plaza before it was cratered, riven with cracks, its fine marble flagging pulverising into dust. The gates were blown wide open and the relief panels of gold and silver that had adorned the gates lay twisted on the steps. Perturabo kicked them aside as he strode through the blackened archway. Gunfire echoed at his back.

Past the gates, the damage to the palace was less obvious. Its halls were dusty and deserted. The rich had fled. They were always the first to go. Sifts of dust drifted down from the ceiling with every explosion going off in the streets outside and the glass was cracked in its fine windows, but in the main the building was unmarked. For the time being, it remained the way he remembered it.

Perturabo recalled the first day he had been brought there – how mighty the great stone edifice had looked to his uneducated eyes! Now he knew more of the galaxy it seemed as rude as a grox shed, and he disdained its attempt at glory. Many times he had offered to build Dammekos a palace that the ruler of Lochos

deserved, only to be declined. Perturabo fulminated on the snub still, but then he had always misunderstood his foster-father.

In the middle of the hall was a bier, carved in stone with marvellous skill, as was the Olympian way. A coffin of fine rock crystal, pan melted and reconstituted to make panes of diamond-hard glass, rested atop it. Within it, on cushions of the finest velvet, slept the preserved corpse of Dammekos, lately Tyrant of Lochos and the Imperial satrap of Olympia.

Perturabo walked reverently to the coffin, though he had exhibited little deference to his foster-father during the tyrant's long life. Perturabo's huge armoured boots crunched on the scattering of debris that had fallen from the roof, the weight of his battleplate crushing it to powder.

He laid his hand upon the lid with the faintest metallic dick. Framed in the gun barrels of his wrist cannons was the tyrant's face shrunken and sallow with great age. Dammekos had lived a very long time - this diminution in stature aside his years had not weighed heavily on him. His corpse wore no augmetics, and had none of the horrifying alterations one could find among the Mechanicum. He was simply very old, and in spite of that a proud patriarch of Lochos still.

Perturabo sighed deeply. His anger flowed out of him.

The smallest noise echoed boldly in the palace hall. The thunderous sounds of destruction outside from the thump of shells to the whooping of air displaced by energy weapons, struggled *to* penetrate the building's (hick walls. An implacable silence had hold of the place, and would not be easily broken by bombs or by rage. Perturabo had both these things in plenitude, and had in fact relied on them for too long If is higher faculties had become blunted by war. The silence, overlaid though it was upon a muffled symphony of destruction, was welcome.

'Father,' he said, and closed his eyes. 'What a pass we find ourselves at.'

'You never called him that when he was alive. Why do you do it now?'

Beneath the age-cracked whisper was a voice he recognised.

Calliphone.

Perturabo looked up. His foster sister occupied the throne of Lochos, sat between the statues of the twin god-kings now made quaint by changing times. Bent with age Calliphone looked older than Dammekos by far. Perturabo found her appearance profoundly shocking. His foster sister, the arch, complicated and intelligent girl he had come close to loving - the only person he had ever felt that way for, save the Emperor himself - had become a hag, and it disgusted him.

'Sister,' he said.

'So now I am sister and he is father? Only rebellion could wring such words

from you. A pity.'

A crackle of bolter fire popped like firecrackers some way off.

'Rebellion,' said Perturabo. 'I should never have trusted you to rule your own affairs.'

'Please!' she said. She breathed hard between her sentences, her ancient lungs insufficient to power her words. 'Do you think this is father's fault?'

'He was agitating behind the scenes against me for years.'

'Trying to claw back a measure of the power he regarded as his, never quite having the courage to acknowledge he held that power because of you,' she said.

Penurabo looked down on the dead face of the man who had tried to be a father to him.

'Accepting the governorship of his own world for the Imperium was an act of realpolitik,' he said. 'He was too cynical to believe in the Emperor's dreams sincerely. I never expected him to be completely faithful.'

'You knew what he was doing, and you did not stop him,' she said. 'Why should I?' he said. 'He was no threat. No one took his sedition seriously, not even him. I think it was a posture he adopted. He could never quite relinquish the role of strongman.' Perturabo smiled at a private memory.

'His actions have unleashed devastation upon us,' she said. 'He encouraged others to think that we could be free again. This is your fault.'

'And you? Do you think Olympia should be free?' said Perturabo. He took two clanking steps towards his foster sister.

'Thanks to you, I have been forced to think so. You were seen as a gift from the gods. Perhaps you were their judgement instead. You are a scourge on this world.'

'There are no gods,' said Perturabo, his voice whispering around the empty hall.

'You deny that too hard, brother,' she said.

'All men decide their own fate. We all choose.' He pointed at her. 'There are no demigods weaving our tapestry of life. We are all sinners, as the old Catherics of Terra had it, and we dwell in their hell.'

'Your nihilism is contemptible, brother,' said Calliphone, 'but I think there is more to you than that. Perhaps you allowed father his games out of affection, and a desire to save his pride.'

Perturabo looked down. He did not know if she were right or not. 'And now he is dead, and his world is ruined.'

'Do not be too sorrowful. Dammekos was a black-hearted man. He drowned my brother Herakon in a vat of wine when he tried to overthrow him. I can't say I

was surprised… My brother was rash, a fool. Still, exile may have been more moderate.'

'He drowned him?'

'*In wine*,' she emphasised. 'Did you spare no thought for what was occurring here while you were on your crusade?'

'What of Andos? He was always the best of you.'

Perturabo privately felt Andos was better than him. Not in any objective sense, for Perturabo was superior to all men, but Andos was balanced in a way that he could never be. He envied him for it.

'Andos refused the medicines of the Emperor, withdrew to his workshops and died ninety years ago. He would have been regarded as a master artisan in his lifetime, were it not for you. You overshadowed everything he ever did, but he did not complain.'

'I am sorry.'

'Why?' said Calliphone. 'You care for nothing but your dreams of utopia. What do real people matter? They get in the way of perfection.'

'I realised something recently,' the primarch said suddenly, spurred to confession by his sister's words. 'Dammekos and I have common ground. The Imperium - it cannot work.' A snort of rueful laughter escaped him. 'Dammekos used to call the drawings I did - the plans, the treatises, all those things I worked on so earnestly - he used to call them my follies. It enraged me. It still does, if I am truthful. But I begin to think maybe he was right. Maybe I inherited this tendency for grandiose plans from my real father.'

Perturabo looked his sister dead in the eye, though it distressed him to stare at that wrinkled face.

'The Imperium is my father's folly,' he continued. 'I try to believe in it because I want it to be true, just like I wanted my great buildings to be true, and the perfect societies that would use them to exist. But they cannot be. There is no such thing as perfection. Humanity is too chaotic to accept true order.'

His facade of iron cracked.

All the pain he had suffered - the isolation, the sense of abandonment that had dogged him all his life, the awful knowledge that he was a hawk among fowl that must restrain itself, the rejection of his brothers, the disregard of his father - was all concentrated in that moment. A single tear dared to roll down his cheek and was immediately resented - not only for the weakness that it showed, but because Perturabo wanted to cry for the broken dream, but he could not. The dream was what should be mourned, yet he could only cry only for himself.

'Wanting something to be does not make it so,' he murmured.

Calliphone nodded. 'You are weak. Badly forged iron looks strong but is brittle as a dried reed. You never understood. People cannot be forced to live to an ideal, they must be *led*. People are messy, and more complicated than your most profound calculations. You would build a perfect world, realising at the final moment that its greatest mar were the people living within it. Now you would destroy them to save your creation. You are a marmoreal god, 'Bo, a tomb lord. You cannot achieve the impossible so you rage like a child, and now you have unleashed this horror upon us because you can accept no compromise.'

A heavy shell exploded near the palace, shaking the windows.

'People do not listen,' said Perturabo. 'They do not know what is good for them.'

'People do not bow to you without love, without respect! Great tyrants rule with the blessing of their people, effective ones through fear. But no tyrant ever achieved anything through indifference. You have sulked your way to damnation. You refused to accept the love of the people. You were given the approbation of a god and an army to conquer the stars, and your first act was to decimate your Legion.'

'They had failed,' he said, clenching his fist.

'Failed to do what? Be the best? You waste your men to prove a point that needs no proof, and then grow angry when no one notices and praises your self-sacrifice. Your petulance has cost this planet whole generations of its youth, bringing your Legion up to strength again and again. You have been an absent king. You have not seen the empty schools, the haunted mothers, the husbandless women.'

'My brother Curze did worse,' said Perturabo. 'I have come to set things right, not to destroy everything as he did. This punishment for treachery must be borne, but I will rebuild Olympia.'

'Comparing yourself to the worst of your brothers to excuse the enormity of your own crimes,' said Calliphone. 'Listen to your words! Setting things to rights would be to cease recruiting and to hear the grievances of the people with forgiveness in your heart. Not this… massacre! You slaughtered the delegation that came to see you, brother. In that moment you lost You lost everything. This was a good place once. Bellicose and unfair, but it had its measure of beauty and nobility. You have destroyed all that. Why, brother?'

'I have other brothers now, my true siblings. I am not yours.'

Calliphone wept, her tears tracking through the dust caking her face.

'And do they care for you as your family here did?' she asked.

'Dammekos never cared for me.'

'No, he only adopted you into his household, and raised you as his son.'

'A calculated risk. He used me for his own ends.'

'He reached out to you over and over,' she retorted. 'You are blind as you are selfish. All wrapped up in yourself, in your own brilliance, in your difference!' Her voice changed, becoming quiet. 'I cared for you.'

'What of it?' he said coldly. 'What good did the affection of mortals ever do for me?'

'You always thought yourself superior to those around you.'

'I am,' he said plainly. 'Look upon me, foster sister. I was made by the Emperor of all mankind, one of twenty sons forged to conquer the galaxy. You are withered, yet I am young. Of course I am superior.'

Calliphone threw up her hand and looked away. 'What happened to the man I knew who wished for no more war? The boy who drew such wonderful things?'

'Nobody wanted them,' he said. 'The Emperor uses me for the most thankless tasks. My men are thrown against the worst of horrors, given the most gruelling roles. We are divided, our talents ignored, our might reduced to splitting rock. My father ignores me. My men go unsung. Our triumphs are unremembered. My brothers mock me as my men bleed. Nobody cares.'

'Is that so?' she said. 'Let me present a different hypothesis to you, brother. Use that fine mind of yours to judge its worth. Here is my version of the story - the Emperor of all mankind came here and found a son whom he valued. He saw an indomitable will, with unshakable determination. He recognised that you would not give up, that you would rise to best any difficulty, that the tedious to you is as necessary a challenge to overcome as the glorious, and neither are to be shirked. Seeing these qualities in you, your father set you difficult tasks, not because he saw no value in you, but the exact opposite - he can trust no one else to get them done.'

'That is not true,' said Perturabo, though the acid of uncertainty began to eat at him. 'He underestimates me. They all do.'

Calliphone went on. 'For a long time, I thought you a fool to follow the Emperor. After all, he is a tyrant like all the rest. Look what he has done to you, I thought. He has brutalised you, and your wars have brutalised your home. But the truth is, brother, I have followed your campaigns carefully, and I noticed a pattern that disturbed and then alarmed me. Always you do things the most difficult way, and in the most painful manner. You cultivate a martyr's complex, lurching from man to man, holding out your bleeding wrists so they might see

how you hurt yourself. You brood in the shadows when all you want to do is scream, 'Look at me!' You are too arrogant to win people over through effort. You expect people to notice you there in the half-darkness, and point and shout out, 'There! There is the great Perturabo! See how he labours without complaint!'

'You came to this court as a precocious child. Your abilities were so prodigious that nobody stopped to look at what you were becoming.'

She got shakily to her feet. Exoskeletal braces whirred under her skirts.

'Perturabo, this will anger you, but you never truly grew into a man.'

'I am not a man,' he said. 'I am far more.'

'In those words is the poison that spoils your potential. It is not the Emperor who has driven this world into rebellion. It is not he who has held it back. It is you and your woeful egotism. Let me tell you, my brother, you who affects to despise love so much yet must certainly crave it over all other things, you are the biggest fool I have ever met.'

With a cry of anger, Perturabo lunged forwards and grasped her by the throat. He raised her up until she was level with his eyes. She grabbed weakly at his wrist. Her mouth gaped for air.

'I am far from a fool, sister,' he said. 'I wished for more from life. I hoped to build a better world for people. I have found that there is only brutality. Whether the court intrigues of the tyrants or this war to conquer the stars, it is all the same. Violence is the constant of human existence.'

'It need not be…' she choked. 'That is the violence… *within* you… speaking…'

'No, no, no,' he said soothingly. 'I know my own limitations. My temper does not cloud my judgement, it focuses it. Humanity is venal and fractious. It can never be governed as one. Everything else is an impossible dream. There is no peace. There is no goodness.' He stroked away the hair from his sister's face with one hand as he strangled her with the other. 'And in such a flawed universe, there can be no mercy for traitors.'

She choked, trying and failing to speak.

Coldly, Perturabo squeezed the life from her. 'You have lived long enough.'

She kept her eyes locked with his as he throttled her. Even as her clawing hands became more desperate, and a dreadful clicking sounded in her throat, she stared into his soul. What he saw reflected in her eyes was not fear, nor loathing, but pity.

With a last minor effort, he crushed her neck. Her eyes rolled back to show the whites and she judged him no more He stared at her in hatred a moment, wavering on the brink of tearing her body to pieces. But a sob escaped his mouth

unexpectedly, and he gently lowered her back into her throne. Her head lolled on its broken neck. Warning chimes peeped insistently from the augmetics concealed in her skirts. A trickle of blood ran from her mouth.

Appalled at what he had done, Perturabo turned away.

Dancing flamelight drew him to the windows of the palace. Ancient, cloudy glass blocked his view, so he methodically punched it out. Muffled weapon's fire became the hellish noise of a city's sack.

Lochos burned.

Flames leapt from every roof. The bombardment had ceased, though Perturabo had not noticed when, and screams had taken the place of the racket of shells and rockets. Sound conveyed the story of Lochos' death. He heard weeping, cries for pity, isolated gun fire. But it was the noises the buildings made as they died that affected him the most. Stone cracked in the heat, suddenly fracturing. Roof beams collapsed with noises like human sighs, sending dancing clouds of cinders skywards. Pantiles shattered with musical, earthy tones. The mix of burning wood and flesh lent the air an acrid savour.

Through gaps in the palace's curtain wall he saw brief vignettes of suffering. A band of blood-smeared citizens ran amok in the streets, their eyes white in the crimson covering their faces. His own warriors worked their war of extermination methodically. A line of civilians linked by chains, new slaves for his armies, were led past by a warsmith. There was a woman weeping on the pavement on the other side of the road, clutching a body in her arms. Fires blazed in the windows behind her, and she and the corpse were caked in pale brown ash. Tears made tracks down her cheeks as cleanly as carved lines. Perturabo could not hear her weeping over the din of pillage. A civilian daubed with a crude Iron Warriors skull advanced on her slowly, and he slashed off her head with his sword.

This was all Perturabo could see of his actions' consequences, a small gap in the fortifications he had surrounded himself with. He wondered if he would care more if the view were broader. The numbness inside him said not.

Molten lead and gold ran in metallic rivers from the guttering of burning buildings. The fire leapt to devour more of his old home ripping through dry buildings. No fire tamers came to put it out. The third and fourth precincts were entirely ablaze and smoke rose already from the fifth and first. The second precinct spat sparks upwards, as if dragons prowled the narrow streets.

Beyond Lochos, the sky was tainted with the fires of other realms. Columns of smoke marked the locations of sacked cities. Alongside the threads of white and

brown, black columns rose from pyres where the bodies of millions were turning from flesh into ash. Lives gone not even their physical traces would remain, only handfuls of bone fragments and dust.

Something broke in Perturabo then; a neglected but essential component of himself gave way.

Not in his body, whose workings he understood well enough, but in that numinous part of his being some might call a soul. He experienced it as a physical sensation, as surely as if a tendon had broken in his leg. No physical collapse came from it, but a rush of emotion instead. There was pain there and bewilderment, but there was something else that he had never felt before. Or perhaps he had, but had bottled it up so well that he no longer recognised the feeling. It took a moment for him to find the word.

He had thought he had felt shame after the rare defeats he had suffered or the times he had been confronted by other petty failures. But what he had thought of as shame he knew now as shallow, wounded pride that had served only to spur him on to anger. This was something else, something total. It overwhelmed him. The devastation he had made of his adopted home took on a terrible clarity, as if his senses, dulled by years of brutal siege warfare, had been sharpened anew so that he might appreciate what he had done.

Blood. There was the smell of so much blood.

'I have become Curze,' he said hoarsely. 'His excuse was insanity. What is mine? My *temper*?'

He sagged against the window, his weight so great the blocks shifted under his grasp and the glass he had not yet broken cracked. He thought of what his brothers would think. He saw Calliphone was right, that he had stood aside and expected to be feted, becoming angry when he had not been. Falsely interpreting his brothers' lack of praise for hatred of him, he had viciously set himself to proving himself worthy of their opprobrium.

How he had succeeded.

'The Emperor will never forgive us this,' he whispered to himself. 'The Emperor will never forgive us. The Emperor *cannot* forgive us. Ever.' He repeated this over and over again, like he were a neophyte given the secret chants of the Legion for the first time Perturabo had found a new Unbreakable Litany.

Forrix found him like that hours later, after nightfall. The first captain entered through the broken gates, a cohort of Dominators behind him.

'My lord,' he said, 'the city is ours. As you commanded, those suitable for service as serfs have been taken. We are in the process of testing appropriate

youths for induction into the Legion. Four-fifths of the population are enslaved or dead. The Twenty-Ninth Grand Battalion is in the process of constructing the warning pyre so—'

'Stop,' said Perturabo hoarsely. He turned a haunted face lit by the capering light of the city's death upon his first captain. His cheeks glistened. 'Enough.'

Seeing the look upon his primarch's face and the tears coursing down it, Forrix turned back to his Dominators. 'Leave us. Now.'

The Terminators dumped from the hall.

'My lord,' said Forrix, going to his primarch's side. Encumbered by his cataphractii plate, he nevertheless forced himself to kneel.

'Forrix, what have we done?'

Forrix looked up into Perturabo's face. He had never seen him look that way. Not once, in all his years at the Lord of Iron's side, had he ever seen Perturabo express doubt.

'I have done as you asked, my lord, without question, as you have ever expected.'

Perturabo looked out of the window, disappointed. 'That is not what I asked.'

Forrix remained on his knees, but the primarch had nothing more to say to him. After five uncomfortable minutes, he stood. He muted his vox-grille and opened a channel to the *Iron Blood*.

'Send a Thunderhawk to these coordinates immediately. We are done here. Olympia is ours again - may they never forget it. The primarch wishes to return to the fleet.'

'See how it bums,' whispered Perturabo. 'This was not the action of an honourable man. I have slain my foster sister and destroyed my own world. I swore an oath to the Emperor that I would spread his message and bring the worlds of mankind back into the fold of Terra. By this action, I have defied his edicts and come close to breaking my oath, for what iteration of Imperial law allows this, when the issue might have been resolved through diplomacy? Their rebellion was my fault, and how did I react?' His voice dropped further, and he gripped Forrix's pauldron. It buckled under the primarch's frightening strength. 'I am lost, my son. What have I become?'

Forrix did not know what to say. The same abyss that was consuming his master beckoned him. There were cracks in the Lord of Iron that no man other than Forrix, perhaps, might see. But they were apparent to the first captain, and they frightened him.

Forrix stood indecisively a moment, then came to a rapid decision. He re-

engaged his vox grille.

'What is done is done, my lord, my primarch. We must leave - the others cannot see you like this.' His voice became more forceful. 'My lord, you asked the impossible of your warriors, and they have delivered you this world without complaint and in the manner you demanded. If they see you doubtful like this, it will shake them to the core.'

'Tell me not all of them did as I bade unquestioningly,' said Perturabo.

Forrix hesitated. 'There were a few rebellious elements, my lord.' Perturabo smiled thinly, as if this were a good thing.

The first captain continued. 'They have been dealt with. Please, attend to my words. You must return to the fleet.'

Perturabo blinked, coming back to his senses. 'Yes. The *Iron Blood*,' he said distractedly. 'First, convey my orders. The reaving will stop immediately. Leave the survivors we have not taken. Let them rebuild.'

'Some of the Legion will not be easily restrained.'

'Stress that the order is mine, and that they will be slain if they do not obey,' said Perturabo. 'What is a little more blood, after all?'

'As you command, my lord.'

'Offer amnesty to those who will serve us as auxilia. There has been enough taking of freedom.'

The howl of an approaching Thunderhawk grew to a thunderous din outside The ancient windows vibrated in the stone. Harsh white searchlights played over the shattered courtyard outside.

'Come now.' Forrix held his hand out. Perturabo grasped it gratefully, then released it.

'You are the most faithful of all my sons,' the primarch said. 'The most faithful.'

'Come now,' repeated Forrix.

Together they left the palace and boarded the craft. The Thunderhawk's engines roared again, fading into the night. Darkness returned to the halls of Lochos, inhabited now only by dust and silence and the ruined bodies of a daughter, her father and a broken man's dreams.

SIXTEEN

FATHER

849.M30

MOUNT TELEPHUS, OLYMPIA

Once more, Perturabo climbed. His life up to that point faded into inconsequentiality. His works of art and science, his time at Lochos, the conquest of Olympia - they all seemed unimportant. They were activities undertaken to while away a long vigil until this sole matter of importance could be addressed.

Finally, after years of waiting, his father had come.

Perturabo climbed hand over hand, rapidly and without due care, ripping his skin on the razored rocks of Mount Telephus. Its pristine snows, untouched by human tread, gleamed above, but they could not outshine the figure that stood at the top of the cliff. Perturabo stared into his brilliance, weeping for the glory. His tears froze upon his skin, coating them in ice that cracked when his cheeks moved.

'Father!' he cried.

The glowing figure said nothing, but awaited him silently below the peak of the mountain. Though his view should often have been obscured by the overhanging crags of the undimbable peak, Perturabo could see his father no matter where he was.

He did not care how. He could see his father.

He was certain that it was him, more certain than he had ever been of anything in his life. From the moment the lights came down from the sky two nights ago and settled upon Telephus, he was sure that his true maker had arrived. Others said the Black Judges had come for their tithe, or that the gods had returned to judge the world, but Perturabo knew with unshakable certainty who it was.

Father.

He had left the palace at Lochos the same day without provisions and taken an aircraft for Telephus. There was nowhere for the light flitter to land, so he had crashed it down at the base of the towering mountain and set out on foot. Through terraced fields, then sparse forest, onto the prickly meadows that grew beyond the treeline, and finally onto bare rock. Almost eight thousand metres, and he had not stopped.

He looked upwards. The star maelstrom was gone.

For the first time Perturabo was free of its scrutiny.

He was not at peace not yet. His hearts thundered with nervous energy. His mind crowded itself with a hundred different possible outcomes of this meeting. Anxiety turned most of them bad. He feared he would not be recognised, or that he would be deemed unworthy, or that he would find his father cruel, or that he had been wrong and it was not his father after all. Positive possibilities dwindled under the weight of his paranoia, inherent to him but honed by years of life among the Olympians. He had lost count of how many plots he had foiled against his life. There was a chance this miracle was but the latest.

His need to know sped him on. Infused with a frantic, almost destructive energy, he climbed at a speed that would have burst a mortal heart, passing far into air that would have starved the lungs of a normal human being. Telephus was so high that altitude sickness and a lack of oxygen afflicted even him, and he ascended in a state close to delirium, taunted by the mocking words of unseen beings.

He reached a broad ledge. Behind him, all of Olympia spread out, the lesser mountains like sycophants crowded around the majesty of Mount Telephus. Sparing no look for the view, he ran across the loose rock of the ledge, imprinting it for the first time with human footprints. A cliff of ice reared up ahead. Without stopping he scrambled upwards, his clawed hands punching holes into the rock face when no handholds existed. The cold burned his flesh. His fingers became numb. Like tools of raw iron isolated from his body, he used them to haul himself upwards. His breath seared his lungs. His limbs trembled

with lactic-acid build-up even his marvellous body could not purge.

Coloured dots danced around his eyes. He reached upwards, throwing his weight after his hand by pushing hard with his feet. He had been climbing too fast and too dangerously, all so he might fulfill his need to see his father. This time his fingers found nothing to grab onto, and he overbalanced.

With an incoherent shout, Perturabo fell backwards, finally defeated.

But he did not fall. An armoured hand grabbed his wrist, and though it was a hand of standard human size - not gargantuan like his own - a great strength was hidden within it.

Perturabo looked up, straight into the face of the shining figure, and he cried out in fear and wonder. His mind was laid bare. A presence as crushing as the collapse of a mountain bore down on him.

The light faded. Perturabo was standing upon solid ice over nine thousand metres in the sky, where the air thinned to blackness and stars shone all day long.

The man's face, previously hidden by the light of his majesty, cleared. Features emerged from the radiance, until Perturabo saw his face and body clearly. A man, mighty and godlike in power, but a man for all that, stood before him. His smile was broad in a flawless face.

+My son,+ he said. His lips remained in that sincere expression of pleasure, the like of which Perturabo had never seen on the calculating faces of the Olympians. No words passed his lips, but still he spoke. +I have found you.+

'I…'

Perturabo swayed. The pressure of his father's mind was immense. The much-feared star maelstrom was nothing compared to this power. Perturabo's deepest thoughts were dragged out into the light of his soul and read as easily as words on paper. He looked down at the man, then fell to his knees with all humility, a quality which, until that moment, he had not known in himself.

'Father.' Kneeling, Perturabo was still taller than the man, but he was left in no doubt that this strange visitor surpassed him in every way.

'I am the Emperor of Terra and of all mankind,' said the man, now speaking aloud. His voice was calm and full of the promise of great things. 'You are Perturabo.'

'I am, I am!' said Perturabo. 'You know me!'

The Emperor laid a hand on his shoulder. Warriors in tall helms and golden armour were arrayed behind the Emperor. They watched him closely.

'You are as dauntless as I intended you to be.' The Emperor looked out over the world, as if he could see the smallest detail from their lofty vantage. 'And you

have achieved much.' His smile broadened with delight. 'I see a world at peace, filled with mighty castles and marvellous devices. We have much to talk of, and I can teach you a great deal. I sense the hunger in you for knowledge I think you and I have many nights of discussion ahead of us.'

'Yes,' said Perturabo. 'Please!' He was struck near dumb by wonder.

'Will you offer me your allegiance? Will you join with me and pledge yourself to humanity's service?'

The warriors in gold tensed. Their weapons pointed at Perturabo.

Ordinarily this insult would have sent him into a towering rage, but Perturabo's arrogance, until then immutable as iron, melted and was swept away, and he answered meekly.

'I want nothing more! I swear that I shall serve you faithfully for all time This I pledge.'

The Emperor looked at him with an expression of infinite wisdom. Deep in his eyes, sorrow lurked. Perturabo wished more than anything to banish that sadness, if he could.

'Then rise, my son.'

The sadness was hidden away again, so that Perturabo doubted he had ever seen it, and was ashamed he could impute such an emotion to so perfect a being.

'Your road will be hard, but few are worthy of it,' said the Emperor. 'I have many tasks for you, the indefatigable, the indomitable, the unrelenting. You shall be my Lord of Iron.'

Perturabo cried out in unabashed joy. Finally, he felt acceptance without caveat. Love radiated from the Emperor for his found son. Perturabo basked in it. For the first time, he felt a sense of true belonging.

'And may it forever be so,' said Perturabo.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Pharos* and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

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